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# Moral Education for Pluralism in Alberta K-12 Policies

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UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Moral Education for Pluralism in Alberta K-12 Policies

by

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A THESIS

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## Abstract

This study investigated kindergarten through grade 12 moral education policy in Alberta for the period 2013-2024 with a twofold purpose. The first was to understand what comprised moral education in Alberta through the identification of explicit and implicit moral elements contained within recent and current policies. The second was to examine how moral education in Alberta, as reflected in its policy texts, reflected the pluralistic nature of Alberta society using a perspective grounded in the value pluralism of Isaiah Berlin. Through an interpretive process of conventional qualitative document content analysis, Alberta policy documents, including statutes, regulations, policies, curriculum guides, curriculum, and legislative Hansard, were examined for elements related to moral education. Three primary themes emerged from the data analysis: (a) the individual is viewed as a moral agent who focuses on their own success, others' well-being and success, and making ethical decisions; (b) the good society is viewed as democratic and civil, embracing pluralism and diversity with some shared values; and (c) the school is a nexus of common and uncommon values in which systems, processes, and structures support common values and guide responses to the convergence of uncommon values present in society. Further, analyzing the identified themes and subthemes using a lens of Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism showed that Alberta policies failed to substantively address the incommensurability and incompatibility of values. This study identified the need for a robust pluralist moral education that includes: pluralism as a core principal, toleration as an educational aim, engagement with agonistic conflicts, fostering of moral independence, critical dialogue and negotiation, and a focus on striving for a minimal threshold of negative liberty to enable the pursuit of universal values essential for human

experience to better prepare them to coexist amongst deep and intractable differences about beliefs, commitments, and ways of life.

## **Preface**

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Kurtis  
Leinweber.

## Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my sincere appreciation to my faculty supervisors over the course of my doctoral studies. Dr. Kent Donlevy's encouragement led to my embarking on this academic journey many years ago and his ongoing support helped me persevere when the challenges were at their greatest. Dr. Ian Winchester's patience and guidance was essential in enabling me to push across the finish line.

I would also like to thank my supervisory committee members, Dr. Dianne Gereluk and Dr. Brenda Spencer whose detailed and challenging feedback contributed to the creation of a much stronger dissertation and a deeper learning experience through the process of its completion. Additionally, I would like to thank my external examiners, Dr. Lynn Bosetti and Dr. Aleem Bharwani, for pushing me to explore more broad and novel perspectives related to my research.

I also want to acknowledge to my parents, Glen and Maxine, who provided me with the moral foundations to be a good person and a belief in the importance of education that encouraged me to explore how doing so can be extremely difficult and complex.

Last, but most definitely not least, I want to extend my love and appreciation to my wife Karen. I am extremely fortunate to have, as my rock, someone who was willing to frequently be a single parent while I locked myself in the den, and who was willing to provide feedback on my work when I came out. Without her love and support, I would never have completed this journey.

**Dedication**

*To my children, Devyn and Camryn*

*The reason I work to create a better future*

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## Chapter 1: Foundations

It is generally accepted that there exists a moral component of education that is both inherent and important (Arthur, 2008; Balch, 2006; Carr, 1991; Damon, 2005; Kohn, 1997; Lickona, 2004; Sergiovanni, 1995; Tirri et al., 2012; Warnock, 1975). Hodgkinson (1991) described this role clearly in stating that “because of [its] relevance to all aspects of the human condition, education is invested from the outset with a moral character” (p. 27). However, while there is general agreement about a moral role in education, the challenge of determining what constitutes that moral education is far less settled.

Current and recent government policies reflect a belief in the importance of moral development as a goal of public education in Canada. In a review of moral education policies across Canada, all ten Canadian provinces and three territories were found to have articulated moral mandates that, at least in part, included stated aims of meeting the needs of the individual and the needs of the community, and three provinces were found to have government policies that specifically mandated moral education (Leinweber et al., 2012). Saskatchewan included moral and character outcomes within its core program of studies (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2008). Quebec required an Ethics, Religion, and Culture program of studies (Éducation, Loisir et Sport Québec, 2008a, 2008b), and Ontario mandated a character development initiative (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008) for all students. Alberta, along with British Columbia, had no required mandate for explicit moral education, although both provinces identified optional initiatives available to educators. Given that all provinces, including Alberta, have articulated moral mandates, with some outside of Alberta having explicit moral education

policies, questions arise as to what policy guidance for moral education is provided in Alberta.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study focused on two challenges that emerge from the ethical aspects of Alberta's Ministerial Order on Student Learning (Government of Alberta, 2024) with respect to moral education in Alberta: the lack of a formalized moral education policy to guide the ethical component of the Alberta's student learning mandate and the challenge for the Alberta government to address society's value pluralism in the crafting of educational policies.

The first problem this study aimed to address was the lack of a specific, formally articulated moral education policy in Alberta. In 2008, the province of Quebec introduced its Ethics, Religion, and Culture program. In that same year, Ontario began mandatory province-wide implementation of its Finding Common Ground character development initiative (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008). With these two programs, Canada's two oldest provinces undertook to design and enforce an explicit moral mandate articulating both their determinations of the good and their preferred pedagogical approaches to teaching it. At the initiation of this study, there was no ministerial mandate to create a curriculum involving moral education. This is problematic, as described by Tuff (2009), who found that Alberta's teachers had little understanding of what moral outcomes they were to teach and the rationale for why they were supposed to teach them. In the absence of a provincial policy, there is a lack of understanding as to what comprises moral education in Alberta.

The second issue is related to our society's pluralist nature. In Alberta, like elsewhere, there are many conceptions of the public good. These conceptions, according to Berlin (1958/2008), may be incompatible or incommensurable with each other, or both. For example, Morris and Cogan (2001) identified four pairs of competing goods, which they deemed critical tensions: (a) the rights of the individual versus the interests of the community, (b) maintaining social stability versus change or reconstruction, (c) social cohesion versus social diversity, and (d) providing a body of received knowledge versus a focus on knowledge that is provisional and constructed. Of these pairings, the first three are moral in nature, as they comprise conflicting ideas of the good that all education systems must attempt to address.

Within Canada, conflicts between differing conceptions of the goods and how to address them within education have been part of the political and policy landscape since before its legal inception. Pre-Confederation discussion over what common values should be promoted through schooling included debates over whether they should or shouldn't explicitly support or even be subordinate to those of Christianity (Di Mascio, 2010). Ongoing debates over desirable citizenship values to be taught have been common throughout history, with conservatives frequently defining citizenship in terms of loyalty, duty, respect, and tradition as opposed to liberals, who defined it in terms of civil liberties and individual rights (Osborne, 2000). Thus, from its outset, education in Canada has faced the complex issue of teaching students a variety of values that have among them a natural tension in their expression of how they together must nurture a free, democratic, cohesive, and stable liberal society (Di Mascio, 2010).

Although there is no comprehensive moral education policy in Alberta, some recent policy decisions by provincial governments highlight one example of conflicting beliefs present in its schools. Measures introduced by the Alberta government to support students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or queer have met with objections from the political opposition, parent organizations, such as Parents for Choice in Education (Huncar, 2016), and some religious private schools that opposed such policies (Mertz, 2016). This creates a challenge for schools and educators who are guided by provincial statutes to develop ethical citizens. Alberta schools need to address this plurality, yet at present, there is little understanding of how that is to be done.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was twofold. The first was to understand Alberta's moral education policies from kindergarten through grade 12 by identifying explicit and implicit moral elements contained in current policy texts. The second purpose of the study was to examine in what way Alberta's moral education policies, as reflected in its policy texts, reflected the pluralistic nature of Alberta society.

The research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What is the nature and scope of kindergarten through grade 12 moral education policies in Alberta as evidenced by government policy documents including, but not limited to, statutes, regulations, policies, curriculum guides, and curriculum?
2. How do the nature and scope of Alberta's kindergarten through grade 12 moral education policies address the pluralistic nature of Alberta's society?

## **Overview of the Research Scope & Design**

In this section, I provide an overview of the methods and conceptual framework used in the study. The conceptual framework is described in detail in chapter 2 and the methods and methodology are discussed in detail in chapter 3, but a brief synopsis of them here will help provide context for the information to follow within this introductory chapter as well as the literature review.

This study was both empirical and theoretical in nature. In this study, I used qualitative document content analysis, an empirical approach, to develop a conceptualization of moral education in Alberta in terms of themes and subthemes as reflected in its policies. I then examined these themes and subthemes using a conceptual framework for pluralist moral education. Qualitative document content analysis is described in detail in chapter 3, but in general, it consisted of identifying moral elements within Alberta policies and qualitatively analyzing them through a process of categorizing those elements and identifying themes that were explicit or implicit in the policies. The resultant themes and subthemes were viewed as a representation of the nature and scope of moral education policy in Alberta.

Moral education policy in Alberta as represented by the themes uncovered in the qualitative document content analysis was then examined using a conceptual framework for pluralist moral education developed for this study. The development of the conceptual framework and Berlinian analysis of policy through the framework's lens was theoretical in nature. The conceptual framework for pluralist moral education is described in detail in chapter 2, but in general it consisted of using the key elements of Isaiah Berlin's (1958/2008; 1988/1990; 1990); value pluralism including value incommensurability,

agonistic value conflicts, universal values, negative liberty and toleration as criteria for which the assumptions of Alberta's moral education policy were explored. The elements of Berlin's value pluralism were integrated into a framework for categorizing underlying assumptions of moral education approaches developed by Sanger and Osguthorpe (2005). The resultant conceptual framework provided a structure for comparing how Alberta policies compared with a Berlinian view about three guiding questions: What is the nature and structure of moral values in a pluralist society? What is or ought to be considered good, right, or virtuous in a pluralist society? What is or ought to be taught relative to moral education in a pluralist society?

This study focused on education policies in Alberta as reflected in official public domain data sources. This study was not concerned with policy implementation, including implicit curricula, which are school structures and expectations that may have embedded moral outcomes. Further delimitations and limitations are discussed in chapter 3.

### **Context and Rationale**

Given the lack of a specific moral education policy, an examination of how the government policies address moral elements of education and, more specifically, the existence of competing values inherent in a pluralist society may address a gap in the understanding of education in Alberta. In particular, the recent political climate may increase the potential relevance of such an examination, given that value conflicts in relation to education policies have become more common.

This study focused on moral education policies in Alberta during its recent period of policy and curricula transformation between 2013 and 2024. The current *Education*



*Act* (2023) represents the most recent of five significant amendments to the primary Act governing education in Alberta since 2012 (Bill 10: An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children, 2015; Bill 24: An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances, 2017; Bill 19: Education Amendment Act, 2015; Bill 8: Education Amendment Act, 2019; Bill 28: School Amendment Act, 2017). The Ministerial Order on the goals of education (Government of Alberta, 2013) updated the goals for education in Alberta for the first time since 1998. And the more recent Ministerial Order on the goals of education (Government of Alberta, 2024) preceded the recent revision of most of the kindergarten through grade 6 program of studies being implemented as of the 2023-24 school year.

The evolution of key policies in Alberta between 2013 and 2024 was impacted by the political environment of the time. The 2019 *Education Act* was originally passed in 2012 but not enacted under the leadership of the governing Progressive Conservative (PC) party. The Progressive Conservative Minister of Education then issued the 2013 Ministerial Order on the goals of education and initiated a process of curriculum redesign. The curriculum redesign process was then halted, and a separate process was initiated with the election of a New Democratic Party (NDP) government in 2015. During the New Democrat government's reign, the aforementioned Bills 10, 19, 24, and 28 were passed, amending the *School Act* in force at the time. The curriculum development process initiated by the New Democrat government was not completed in time for implementation prior to the United Conservative Party (UCP) being elected in 2019. Under the United Conservative Party, the *Education Act* was amended and enacted, two revised Ministerial Orders on the goals of education were issued, and a new curriculum for most subjects in kindergarten through grade 6 was approved and implemented. There

were additional delays in approval and implementation of the kindergarten through grade 6 social studies curriculum, as a draft program of studies received extreme critical feedback, leading the government to postpone implementation. Following completion of this study, a revised social studies curriculum was approved, with piloting planned for 2023-24 and full implementation the following year. den Heyer (2021) identified the politicization of curriculum during this period as the cause of severe delays in the development and implementation of a modernized curriculum in Alberta. This is a concrete example of a challenge faced in a pluralist society, as different sides of the political spectrum in Alberta prioritize different values.

Other researchers have identified that a number of current political debates in society are related to controversial topics in schools. These issues have included, for example, religious accommodations (Graveland, 2016), sexual orientation and gender identity (Huncar, 2016), and medical assistance in dying (Bill C-7: An Act to amend the Criminal Code, 2021; Tunney, 2016). These conflicts highlight the challenges contemporary policymakers and educators face in addressing plural views of what constitutes right and wrong. In each of these issues, individuals on both sides of the debate believe that what they value is valid, but the two goals are in conflict. This necessity of choosing between arguably valid but conflicting goals is an “inescapable characteristic of the human condition” (Berlin, 1958/2008 p. 214).

In some cases, disagreements over education policies about sexuality and religious education have resulted in judicial involvement. For example, in Ontario, there was disagreement over the 2015 implementation of a more pro-sexuality approach to human sexuality education than had traditionally been included in the curriculum

(Ensslen & Ursel, 2015). When the subsequent government replaced it with the previous 2010 curriculum, the switch was challenged on the basis that it was outdated, but an Ontario court ruled in favour of the province's right to establish curriculum and determined the curriculum did not restrict inclusive teaching (*ETFO et al. v. Her Majesty the Queen*, 2019). In Quebec, debate over the implementation of the Ethics, Religion, and Culture program, which required the neutral teaching about different religions, including Catholicism, reached the Supreme Court of Canada on multiple occasions. In one instance, the Court sided with the province in supporting their right to require the learning about religions outside of one's own beliefs as part of the program of studies (*S. L. v. Commission scolaire des Chênes*, 2012). In another case, the Court determined that it was unreasonable for the province to require that learning about Catholicism be presented neutrally, rather than endorsed, in a Catholic school (*Loyola High School v. Quebec*, 2015). As the Alberta government pursues student development in line with its definition of an ethical citizen, further conflicts can be expected, similar to those experienced in other provinces.

Arguably, globalization has increased citizens' exposure to a plethora of potentially incommensurate values, such as the individualism more prevalent in Western cultures versus the collectivism prioritized in many Eastern and Indigenous cultures or the consumerism of capitalist societies versus the communalism of traditional sharing or subsistence economies (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). This is compounded by significant demographic shifts in the diversity of Canadian citizenry since the 1970s. In the 2018 administration of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Canada had the highest proportion of immigrant students (35%) amongst all participating

countries, with the province of Alberta (36%) slightly higher (Council of Ministers of Education Canada, 2021). “In response to an increasingly diverse racial and ethnic population, schools have needed to adapt to the changing social context of the communities that they serve” (Gérin-Lajoie, 2012, p. 205).

With globalization and migration potentially magnifying the inherent challenge of conflicting values in a pluralistic society, educating students to engage in that complex society is of increasing importance.

### **Definitions**

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions are provided because they reveal distinctions among many of the elements common to the discourse of moral philosophy and moral education.

*Berlinian analysis.* For the purposes of this dissertation, I use the term Berlinian analysis to refer to the use of Isaiah Berlin’s value pluralism, which emphasizes that “the ends of life are many, and not all of them are compatible with each other” (Berlin, 1990, p. 11), as a primary analytical lens through which to examine moral education in Alberta’s policies. As a secondary lens for analysis, I use Berlin’s positive and negative liberty, with negative liberty being “the degree to which no human being interferes with my activity” (Berlin, 1958/2008, p. 169) and positive liberty being the degree to which “my life and decisions depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind” (Berlin, 1958/2008, p. 178).

A more thorough description of Berlin’s key concepts is included in chapter 2, and the method of performing the Berlinian analysis is described in the third chapter of this dissertation.

*Ethical.* The term ethical can be defined both descriptively and normatively. Descriptively, ethical is defined as “being related to a set of moral principles dealing with what is good and bad” (Mish, 1986, pp. 416–417). Normatively, moral is defined as “conforming to accepted standards of conduct” (Mish, 1986, p. 771). The terms moral and ethical are used interchangeably for the purposes of this study.

*Ethics.* Ethics and morality are often used interchangeably, although some authors differentiate them in terms of scope, defining morality as dealing with individuals and defining ethics as dealing with a particular community, society, or sphere of activity. However, for the purposes of this study, ethics refers to the branch of knowledge or study that deals with moral principles that “may assert whether some particular action is right or wrong; ... may offer a distinction between good and bad characters or dispositions; or may propound some principle from which more detailed judgements of these sorts might be inferred” (Mackie, 1977, p. 9).

*Meta-ethics.* Meta-ethics is the branch of ethics that attempts to describe the nature and scope of morality in terms of the metaphysical, epistemological, semantic, and psychological presuppositions and commitments of moral thought, talk, and practice (Sayre-McCord, 1986).

*Monism (moral).* Moral monism is the view that all ethical questions have a single correct answer and that all these answers dovetail within a single, coherent moral system dominated by one value, or small set of values, which overrides or serves as a common denominator for all others (Crowder, 2003).

*Moral.* For purposes of this study, the term moral is used both descriptively and normatively. Descriptively, moral is defined as “being concerned with the principles of

right and wrong” (Mish, 1986, p. 771). Normatively, moral is defined as “conforming to a standard of right or good behaviour” (Mish, 1986, p. 771).

*Moral education.* In this study, the term moral education is used to refer to the general category of educational approaches designed to create moral individuals and communities (Power et al., 2008a).

- *Explicit moral education.* Explicit moral education refers to educational goals and pedagogical approaches that are overtly focused on addressing moral issues. They may be religious or secular, but moral education is directly identified as a key goal of such approaches (Cox, 1988).
- *Implicit moral education.* Not all educational approaches that may impact the moral development of individuals and communities are explicit. Historical and contemporary schooling have both involved multiple modes of implicit goals and pedagogy that have impacted moral development, including history and social studies curricula, value-laden material, and resources within various curricular areas, such as English readers and literature selections. Many educationalists have also explored the role of the hidden curriculum<sup>1</sup> and the possible moral impact of the very structures of education systems (Gatto, 2005).

*Moral mandate.* In this study, a moral mandate refers to one or more governmental policies that provide direction as to the moral aims of education.

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<sup>1</sup> Gatto (2005) defines the hidden curriculum as a set of implicit lessons and values that are conveyed in schools beyond the formal curriculum. He is critical of schools’ hidden curricula, arguing that it teaches students to conform and comply, rather than encouraging critical thinking and creativity.

*Morality.* Morality is defined as a system of rules and principles that prescribe human behavior and set standards for right and wrong actions (Pojman, 2006, p. 11).

*Normative ethics.* Normative ethics is the branch of ethics that attempts to determine the most adequate system of moral norms. Normative theories can be categorized as focused on norms for persons or actions (Power et al., 2008b). Action-focused normative theories define what ought to be done in terms of the nature of actions, such as Kantian ethics (Kant, 1993), or consequences of actions, such as utilitarianism (Bentham, 1789/2007). Person-focused normative theories define what it is to be a good person, such as Aristotle's virtue ethics (Aristotle, 350B.C.E./1980). It can be differentiated from meta-ethics, which addresses questions about the objectivity of moral values, the nature of moral judgments, and the language used in moral discourse (Sayre-McCord, 1986). It is also different than applied ethics, which applies ethical principles to specific moral problems in real-world contexts (Singer, 2011).

*Policy.* For this study, policy is considered to be "a statement by a government of what it intends to do such as a law, regulation, ruling, decision or order" (Dye, 2017, p. 1). For purposes of this study, statements of government intention were interpreted to mean only those policies that were approved for mandatory implementation across the Alberta school system. The specific policy texts considered for this study are described in the third chapter's methods section.

*Relativism (moral).* Moral relativism is the view that "there are no universally valid moral principles, but rather that all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice" (Pojman, 2006, p. 23).

*Value Pluralism.* Value pluralism, sometimes labelled as moral pluralism, is the view that there are different value systems in the world that are each comprised of values that are irreducibly multiple, frequently incompatible, and often incommensurable with one another (Crowder, 2003). Value pluralism is commonly used to describe two different ways in which value differences are contextualized. In some cases, value pluralism is viewed as an objective description of the fact that there are multiple, often conflicting, moral values or principles that are equally fundamental and cannot be reduced to a single overarching principle (Crowder, 2007). In other cases, the term value pluralism more specifically refers to value differences that arise from cultural differences that need to be accommodated to navigate the complexity of moral life (Kekes, 1993).

*Values.* Values refers to “an ensemble of principles, standards or fundamental beliefs that inform a person or society’s conception of a well-lived human life and what constitutes proper self-regard and treatment of others” (Power et al., 2008b, p. 454).

*Virtue (virtuous).* Virtues refer to “dispositional clusters, concerned with praiseworthy functioning in a number of significant and distinguishable spheres of human life. Each virtue is typically seen to comprise a unique set of perception/recognition, emotion, desire, motivation, behaviour and comportment or style, applicable in the relevant sphere” (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 14).

### **Assumptions**

I made a number of assumptions at the outset of this study. From a theoretical standpoint, I agree with Berlin’s (1958/2008) assessment that value pluralism is an unavoidable characteristic of society (p. 216), including contemporary Alberta. The rationale for my belief is provided in chapter 2, but my belief did not develop through the



process of reviewing the literature. Rather, that process led to an affirmation of my previously held belief that came from having spent 35 years attending and working in Alberta public schools.

From a methodological standpoint, public government policy documents were assumed to be an accurate reflection of a government's publicly espoused aims, rationale, and assumptions that are promulgated via direct and indirect moral education policies. Additional philosophical assumptions underlying the research design of the study are discussed in the methods and methodology chapter.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study did not involve human subjects and, hence, required no involvement of the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Ethics Review Board. However, given that its focus was related to issues of morality and ethics and that the data sources included official policies and the expressed thoughts and opinions of policymakers, my responsibility as a researcher to ensure the fair representation of the data could be viewed as having an ethical dimension in addition to the research requirements of validity and reliability. This is further discussed in the methodology chapter.

### **Organization of Dissertation**

In chapter 1 of this dissertation, I present the purpose, problem, research questions, rationale, significance, definitions, delimitations, limitations, assumptions, and ethical considerations of the study. Chapter 2, the literature review, includes three parts. The first is a review of the key tenets of Berlin's value pluralism and liberalism as well as some of the key critiques of Berlin's ideas. The second part is a review of the historical and contemporary approaches to moral education common to North America. The third

part looks to bridge the first two by exploring how Berlin's ideas connect to moral education, including a review of monist and relativist elements amongst the various approaches. In chapter 3, I describe the study's methodology and methods, as well as the rationale for their selection as a means to address the problem and research questions. Researcher bias and trustworthiness are also addressed. Chapter 4 provides the findings of the qualitative document content analysis of the data, including the various levels of policies and other documentation that comprised the dataset. The qualitative document content analysis is presented in the form of themes and subthemes that arose through the qualitative document content analysis of Alberta policies. In Chapter 5, I discuss the abstracted themes identified in Alberta moral education policies in terms of the study's conceptual framework including the Berlinian lenses of: incommensurability and incompatibility of human values as unavoidable, the preference of pluralism to monism, and the requirement of a minimum degree of negative liberty as essential to human experience. Chapter 6 concludes the dissertation with an extension of the discussion beyond the results to include my offering of recommendations for future praxis and research considerations in Alberta and beyond.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

The literature review consists of three parts. Part 1 identifies Berlin's (1958/2008; 1988/1990) key ideas of value pluralism, toleration, and positive and negative liberty with common critiques. Part 2 summarizes the historical and contemporary approaches to moral education in North America, identifying the underlying assumptions of each and the critical tensions among them. Part 3 connects Berlin's key ideas with a framework of assumptions underlying moral education to develop a conceptual framework for pluralist moral education.

### **Part 1: Isaiah Berlin's Pluralism, Toleration, and Positive and Negative Liberty**

In this section, I review Berlin's (1958/2008; 1988/1990) key ideas that may be relevant to moral education. This includes: value pluralism, toleration, positive liberty, and negative liberty. Following that review, some of the primary critiques of his arguments are discussed.

#### ***Value Pluralism***

Isaiah Berlin is generally credited with introducing the concept of value pluralism into Anglo-American political philosophy. His 1958 essay, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, is often identified as the origin of the pluralist movement in political theory (Lassman, 2011). Berlin (1958/2008) argued that value pluralism is a fact of human existence. Compared to the seeking of monistic truths, pluralism, stated Berlin, "is truer, because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another (p. 216). His explicit articulation of pluralism may have been the first, yet even Berlin has credited the

existence of his ideas to the works of others, including Machiavelli, Vico, Herder, and Tolstoy (Berlin, 1988/1990).

Galston (2002) summarized five key elements of Berlin's value pluralism:

1. Value pluralism is to be distinguished from its opposite, monism, which attempts to reduce all goods to a common measure or create a comprehensive hierarchy or ordering for them.
2. Values, or objective goods, cannot be fully ranked. There is no common measure for all goods, which are qualitatively heterogeneous or incommensurable.
3. Some goods are required for any "choice worthy" conception of human life.
4. Beyond this list of basic goods, there is a wide range of legitimate conceptions of good lives.
5. Value pluralism ought not to be confused with relativism. The distinction between good and bad or right and wrong is objective and rationally defensible. (pp. 5-6)

The following sections will address these key elements of Berlin's value pluralism.

**Pluralism Versus Monism.** Berlin's pluralism arose in direct opposition to what he viewed as the dominant monist views of history. These views had, as their defining feature, a belief in a singular, unified utopian ideal for humankind. Berlin (1988/1990) challenged what he termed the *Ionian fallacy* of believing in a Platonic ideal that all genuine questions must have one true answer and only one, all the rest being necessarily errors; . . . that there must be a dependable path towards the discovery

of these truths; . . . and that the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for truth cannot be incompatible with another - this we know a priori. (pp. 5–6)

Berlin (1988/1990) further stated that:

the notion of a perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable - that is a truism - but conceptually incoherent. . . Some among the great goods cannot live together.

That is a conceptual truth. We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss. (p. 13)

The major monist traditions of history included the “true religion” of fundamentalist Catholics or Protestants, the “true reason” of French rationalists, the “natural laws” of British empiricists, the “atavistic volksgeist” of German romanticists, and the “perfect society” of future utopists (Mali, 2012). However, it was the perceived evils of two monist worldviews of Berlin’s lifetime, the final “revolution” of communists and final “solution” of the National Socialists that provided much motivation for Berlin’s work (Mali, 2012). Berlin (1958/2008) himself acknowledged this much when he wrote:

One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals - justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a

final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another. (p. 212)

In this statement, Berlin summarized his argument that any belief in a utopic vision, regardless of its particulars of its *ideal* or of its source, requires the holder to also maintain a belief that all positive values must be compatible with each other. Only by grounding one's thinking in the belief that all positive values can be compatible can an individual or group coherently argue that a final solution exists. Berlin, as will be discussed next, disagreed with beliefs in utopic thinking primarily because he disagreed with the required assumptions on the compatible nature of values on which utopic thinking is premised.

**Incommensurability.** Prior to Berlin's (1958/2008) argument that the very nature of human values is often incommensurable, there was an acknowledgement that human values are often in conflict or incompatible with one another. This conflict, however, was often viewed as a weakness or limitation of human thought (Williams, 1981). The dominant belief held was that if humans could overcome their pathology in reasoning, value conflicts could be resolved by appealing to a higher value, such as the utilitarian's conception of utility (Bentham, 1789/2007; Mills, 1861/2007). However, Berlin (1958/2008) argued that the incommensurability of values goes beyond merely stating that they are not compatible, but rather that they are incomparable. In support of Berlin's view, Williams (1981) described what is meant by the incomparability of values in making the following claims as to their incommensurate nature:

1. There is no currency by which each conflict of values can be measured and resolved.
2. It is not true that for each conflict of values there is some independent value that can be appealed in order to resolve that conflict.
3. There is no independent value that can be appealed to in order to rationally resolve that conflict.
4. No conflict of values can ever be rationally resolved.
5. Moral pluralism exists when people hold opposed moral principles or incompatible conceptions of the human good or ideals of excellence, or when their particular identities and attachments lead to systematic differences on matters of policy. (p. 77)

Crowder (2002) identified three ways in which values could be said to be incommensurable; they may be incomparable, immeasurable, or unrankable. Gray (2013) used Kekes' (1993) definition of incomparability as being "so unlike as to exclude any reasonable comparison among them. Square roots and insults, smells and canasta, birds and x-rays seem to exclude any common yardstick by which we could evaluate their respective merits or demerits" (p. 21). Gray rejected this view of incommensurability as being too strong, arguing it would preclude any rational bases for deciding amongst conflicting values (p. 50). Crowder (2002) rejected the view of incommensurability as immeasurable as being incomplete or too weak. Although the absence of any type of commensurating unit would prohibit the cardinal ranking of values, it would still permit ordinal ranking by qualitative criteria (p. 52). Crowder (2002) further argued that unrankability is the most appropriate lens through which to view incommensurability.

This view of value incommensurability does not mean that values can never be ranked. It does, however, argue that there exists no *summum bonum* or ultimate-value that overrides all other values and by which other values can be measured. As such, rendering any ranking of values in the abstract without considering the context would be arbitrary, but within a specific context, there may be a reasonable purpose to rank values in a certain way (p. 53).

Berlin (1958/2008) cited the conflict between equality and freedom as an example of incommensurate values. To maximize equality among its members, a society would be required to limit the freedom of some of its members, whereas maximizing freedom would permit inequalities among the members. Berlin (1958/2008) referred to choices between two perceived goods, such as this, as agonizing choices; choices for which there is no means of resolving or harmonizing the conflict. In these situations, advocating for one value necessitates limitations on another.

**Universal Values.** Although Berlin (1958/2008) defended pluralism and the incommensurate nature of many values, as well as the lack of an overarching supreme value, he did not argue that these diverse ends are infinite. Rather, in conversation with Jahanbegloo (2007), Berlin argued that there is a limited number of goods that human beings can meaningfully value, stating:

The idea of human rights rests on the true belief that there are certain goods - freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, and love - that are in the interest of all human beings, as such, not as members of this or that nationality, religion, profession, or character; and that it is right to meet these claims and to protect people against those who ignore or deny them. There are certain things which



human beings require as such, not because they are Frenchmen, Germans, or medieval scholars or grocers but because they lead human lives as men and women. (p. 37)

It is Berlin's (1958/2008) argument that these values are universal. Conflicts arise not because these values are categorically denied, but because there is disagreement over who is entitled to them (Berlin, 2007).

**Plurality of Legitimate Values.** While a core set of values is a necessary element of Berlin's pluralism, another component essential to Berlin's conceptualization of value pluralism is that beyond the range of universal values exists an irreducibly plural number of legitimate values. Gray (2013) identified three ways in which a plurality of values may exist. First, there may be a plurality among the values of a particular moral system themselves, as represented by conflicts "which neither theoretical nor practical reasoning about them can resolve" (p. 79). For example, debates over the relative merits of liberty versus equality occur on this level. Second, plurality may exist within the goods of a particular moral system as each good is "internally complex and inherently pluralistic, containing conflicting elements, some of which are constitutive incommensurables" (p. 79). Gray uses the examples of Berlin's positive and negative liberty as well as equality of outcomes versus equality of opportunity to highlight in-value pluralism. Third, a plurality of values may exist between different cultures. "Different cultural forms will generate different moralities and values... specifying different, and incommensurable, excellences, virtues and conceptions of the good" (p. 80).

The plurality of values, especially the intercultural plurality, appears to leave Berlin's pluralism open to being labelled relativist. However, while Berlin's description

of what qualifies as a legitimate value is extremely broad, it is not inclusive of all possible values. By putting limits on the scope of legitimate human values, Berlin distinguishes his pluralism from moral relativism.

**Pluralism vs. Relativism.** Berlin distinguished between moral pluralism and moral relativism. Berlin (1988/1990), defined relativism as:

a doctrine according to which the judgment of a man or a group, since it is the expression or statement of a taste, or emotional attitude or outlook, is simply what it is, with no objective correlative that determines its truth or falsehood....The most extreme versions of cultural relativism...hold that one culture can scarcely begin to understand what other cultures live by - can only describe their behavior but not its purpose or meaning (p. 80).

He described relativism as a form of epistemological skepticism, in which an individual or culture's values and ideas have no objective correlate with which truth claims can be made. According to the relativist worldview, the vast differences in cultural values are deemed incapable of being understood outside of that culture. Berlin (1990) argued that "to reject the notion of objective truth in values is to throw open the gates to the possibility of ultimate human self-destruction" (Berlin, 1990, p. 11). Berlin (1988/1990) contrasted this with pluralism, in which, although varied and incommensurable, moral and cultural systems can be understood by those external to those systems by virtue of common human intuitions.

Relativism holds that a value set can only be viewed from within a culture, and, as a result, there can be no such thing as objective judgment. Berlin (1958/2008) argued that the existence of some universal values and a minimum threshold of humanity, which

avoids barbarism and cruelty, allows for some objectivity and, albeit minimally, reduces the number of moral ends. Berlin (2013) elaborated on his minimum threshold of humanity, stating:

If I say of someone that he is kind or cruel, loves truth or is indifferent to it, he remains human in either case. But if I find a man to whom it literally makes no difference whether he kicks a pebble or kills his family, since either would be an antidote to ennui or inactivity, I shall not be disposed, like consistent relativists, to attribute to him merely a different code of morality from my own or that of most men, or declare that we disagree on essentials, but shall begin to speak of insanity and inhumanity; I shall be inclined to consider him mad, as a man who thinks he is Napoleon is mad; which is a way of saying that I do not regard such a being as being fully a man at all (p. 189).

As such, Berlin can be seen to advocate for an irreducible but constrained pluralism in which inherent conflicts requiring agonistic choices will undoubtedly exist. And while Berlin did not offer a systematic account of how those conflicts should be addressed, he did suggest that “if destructive conflict is to be avoided compromises have to be effected, and a minimum degree of toleration, however reluctant, becomes indispensable” (Jahanbegloo, 2007, p. 44). For Berlin, toleration is not merely desirable in the face of value pluralism, it is essential.

### ***Toleration***

Berlin (2000) believed that in a pluralistic society, toleration is essential for maintaining a stable and peaceful coexistence among individuals and groups with differing values and beliefs. Liberalism, according to Berlin, is the political doctrine best

suited to accommodate value pluralism because it promotes tolerance and protects individual freedoms. He stated, “A pluralistic society must be tolerant, for only through toleration can the multiple, conflicting values that individuals hold be peacefully accommodated” (p. 216). Berlin saw toleration not only as a moral imperative, but also as crucial for preventing conflicts and fostering a society where diverse ways of life can thrive. “Tolerance is a pragmatic necessity in a world of diverse and conflicting values. Without it, social harmony and individual freedoms are at constant risk” (Berlin, 1990, p. 19). The importance that Berlin placed on toleration is inexorably linked to his belief in the unavoidable existence of agonist conflicts created by the incommensurable nature of values. Since conflicts cannot be avoided or eliminated, the ability to exist within a pluralist society requires individuals to be tolerant of conflicting values among people as well as within their own thinking. Berlin’s tolerance, however, did have its limits which often connected to his views on liberty.

### ***Positive and Negative Liberty***

Berlin’s (1958/2008) conceptualization of value pluralism first appeared in his essay on two concepts of liberty. In this essay, Berlin differentiated between what he terms positive and negative liberty. Negative liberty is freedom from constraints that allows individuals to formulate and pursue their own projects unobstructed by others. Negative liberty describes the absence of coercion, whereas positive liberty describes the freedom or ability of an individual to pursue their own project. On the surface, these two types of liberty may not appear all that different, but it is in their application that Berlin (1958/2008) highlighted the distinction.

If a person is perceived to be unaware of their true nature, then their ability to pursue their own project in a manner that is best may appear to be impaired. They are limited, although not coerced, in their ability to accomplish goals they might otherwise have. According to Berlin (1958/2008), the danger in promoting positive liberty, as opposed to negative liberty, is that the individual's goals may be determined by others, and that coercion may be justified in the desire to have the individual attain what they either do not want or do not know they want. Berlin (1958/2008) maintained that the choice between genuine alternatives is an essential condition to having freedom. The willingness to achieve this positive liberty at any cost, feared Berlin, may lead to despotism and tyranny.

For Berlin (1958/2008), liberty is just one of many plural values and that it may be, in situations, limited to promote another value. He specifically referred to equality as a value that may conflict with liberty. He did, however, appear to grant liberty special status amongst those other values, even equality. Berlin's (1958/2008) distinction between negative and positive liberty is built around the importance of choice. For Berlin, the requirement of choice, especially as seen in negative liberty, is essential to the human experience, and a "lack of freedom of choice means dehumanization" (Janhanbegloo, 2007, p. 72). This importance placed on liberty caused Berlin (1958/2008) to demand that, when it occurred, a loss of liberty be acknowledged: "It is one thing to say that I may be coerced for my own good which I am too blind to see. It is another to say I am not being coerced" (p. 180). Berlin demanded a level of what could be viewed as epistemological integrity, especially around the idea of liberty. He argued

that the true recognition of unresolvable conflicts requires the acknowledgment of what is in conflict and what would be gained or lost depending on how that conflict is negotiated.

In articulating his account of pluralism and liberty, Berlin (1958/2008) clearly indicated his support for some type of liberal pluralism; however, he acknowledged that they are not necessarily logically connected (Janhabegloo, 2007, p. 44). This lack of connection between the two concepts has been identified by scholars such as Crowder (2015), Galston (2009), and Gray (2013), but they responded to this omission differently. Gray argued that there is no necessary connection between pluralism and liberalism and placed himself in the camp of non-liberal pluralism, arguing that Berlin's (1958/2008) account of pluralism precludes liberalism from being the only system as it is only one of many different but valid systems. Galston (2009) and Crowder (2015) agreed that liberalism arises from pluralism as a preferential system. However, their views of liberalism differed, primarily based on their perceived role of autonomy. Crowder (2015) argued for rationalist liberalism, which is an interpretation of Berlin that emphasizes the role of individual autonomy in a manner that may preclude the protection of illiberal groups at the expense of individual liberty. Galston (2009) argued for a pluralist liberalism in which individual autonomy is viewed as one of many plural values that need not necessarily be elevated over others. While they disagree on the prioritization of individual autonomy, both Galston and Crowder's perspectives align with Berlin's belief that a minimal threshold of negative liberty is essential to the human experience.

### *Critiques of Berlin*

Isaiah Berlin's pluralism has been both influential and subject to criticism. This section will summarize some of the concerns and objections expressed by some of Berlin's major critics.

**The Monist Critiques.** One significant criticism of Berlin's pluralism comes from proponents of moral monism, the view that there is a single, overarching moral principle or set of principles that can guide ethical decision-making. For example, Dworkin (2001) challenged the existence of Berlin's agonist conflict through the lens of pragmatism, arguing that our practical experiences do not equate to the type of conflict that Berlin described in stating "we are not beholden to two independent sovereign powers...we are drawn to each of the rival positions through arguments that, if we were finally to accept them as authoritative, would release us from the appeal of the other one" (p. 82). Dworkin (2001) further argued that even in situations in which liberty and equality are in conflict, choosing one over the other does not necessitate the creation of harm, allowing for the possibility of integration. Dworkin's (2011) conceptualization of value unity permits the integration of his accounts of liberty and equality with each other, eliminating, in his perspective, the tragic conflict described by Berlin. In contrast, Dworkin argued that Berlin's view that values are independent denies the possibility of integrating our values into a coherent whole. Dworkin challenged Berlin's view that value conflicts were all about us, and evident to all except the immature stating that Berlin did not "sustain that very broad claim...even in the case he took as paradigm; the supposed conflict between liberty and equality" (p. 116).

Studebaker (2014) argued that value conceptions among various cultures and periods do not differ as much as Berlin suggested. He argued that human conflict is always about the distribution of food, water, shelter, friendship, sex, socialization, or security, and that our conceptions of values and virtues shift with material changes in human access to these timeless essentials. In contrast with Berlin, Studebaker stated that moral theories are not inextricably linked to the specific problems they solve and wider contexts they operate in. They are pragmatic, ends-focused, and defined with the intention of getting people more of the ancient goods they have always desired.

Walzer (1983) advocated for pluralism insofar as he agreed with Berlin's belief that there exists a plural spectrum of values that cannot be integrated into a single moral framework. But where Berlin's emphasis was on the incommensurability of values and unresolvable agonistic conflicts, Walzer argued for a more limited pluralism that contained monist elements. For example, Walzer argued that while values may be diverse and context-dependent, they do not necessarily conflict to the extent that they cannot be harmonized within a social or political framework. Specifically, Walzer argued that it is possible to create a coherent, although not fully integrated, approach to values by respecting the distinct spheres, such as wealth, power, education, etc., in which different values operate. Within each of these spheres, Walzer argued that values could be evaluated according to principles appropriate to their particular sphere or context. For example, in the economic sphere, wealth could be distributed based on market principles. In the political sphere, power could be distributed based on democratic participation. As such, Walzer's framework included a number of parallel spheres, each of which had an overarching monist-like principle or set of principles to guide distribution.



Walzer's framework was also monist in that it was directed towards an overall goal of justice as a primary focus. His conception of justice would occur in a form that he labelled complex equality. Walzer argued that complex equality is an ultimate good that can be potentially created if the different spheres are guided by different principles, helping to ensure that no social good serves or can serve as a means of dominating access to another (p. 19). While Walzer's framework acknowledged, and in some ways advocated for, a pluralism of values, it did so in a manner that attempted to integrate those values within a coherent social structure guided by a monist goal of justice via complex equality.

Monist critiques of Berlin's value pluralism such as those offered by Dworkin (2011) and Studebaker (2014) contend that moral monism provides a more robust foundation for addressing ethical questions, as it offers clear criteria for distinguishing between right and wrong lacking in Berlin's pluralism. Walzer's (1983) spheres of justice do the same, albeit providing a weaker form of monism than others.

**Communitarian Critiques.** Berlin's liberalism holds that we should promote people's best interests by letting them choose for themselves what sort of life they want to lead. Communitarian critics of Berlin's thought typically focused on concerns with a perceived lack of sufficient attention to historical and cultural contexts that shape value systems and its emphasis on the individual as a rational and autonomous determiner of values (Crowder 2006, 2020). Communitarians object to the liberal claim that values or goods are ahistorical and a priori in nature. For example, Walzer (1983) argued values are best understood and integrated within the context of community practices and shared understandings. Because it is not possible to step outside of our various histories and

cultures, identifying values and principles is not a matter of theoretical rational argument but rather a matter of cultural interpretation. As a result, determining a principle value such as liberty or justice can only be identified by seeing how a particular community understands the value of various goods.

A second, and related, branch of the communitarian critique is that liberalism, in basing its theories on distinct concepts of individual rights and autonomy, fails to appreciate the extent to which individual freedom and wellbeing are not only connected to the community but are only possible within the community (Haste, 1996). Sandel (1998) articulated this perspective in stating:

We cannot be wholly unencumbered subjects of possession, individuated in advance and given prior to our ends, but must be subjects constituted in part by our central aspirations and attachments, ... And in so far as our constitutive self-understandings comprehend a wider subject than the individual alone, whether a family or tribe or city or class or nation or people, to the extent they define a community (p. 172).

This critique is further supported by Taylor (1985) who argued that Berlin's focus on negative liberty neglected the necessity of positive liberty's contribution to an individual's conception of the good. He differentiated between what he referred to as an opportunity-concept of freedom and an exercise-concept of freedom and an opportunity-concept of liberty, arguing that Berlin's opportunity-concept of liberty was insufficient. Taylor (1985) stated:

negative theories can rely simply on an opportunity-concept, where being free is a matter of what we can do, of what it is open to us to do, whether or not we do

anything to exercise these options.... Freedom consists just in there being no obstacle. It is a sufficient condition of one's being free that nothing stand in the way (p. 213).

In contrast, he argued for an exercise-concept of liberty, stating:

Doctrines of positive freedom are concerned with a view of freedom which involves essentially the exercising of control over one's life. On this view, one is free only to the extent that one has effectively determined oneself and the shape of one's life. The concept of freedom here is an exercise-concept (p. 213).

Taylor contended that an exercise-concept of freedom requires not only the absence of interference but also the presence of supportive social structures that enable individuals to pursue their goals and values. Taylor further posited that positive liberty entails the presence of historical and cultural preconditions that individuals must meet in order to achieve the level of self-realization required before negative liberty becomes a relevant factor.

Taylor's criticism of Berlin's (2001) failure to address the deeper social and communal conditions that influence individual freedoms is compounded by a second critique also connected to a communitarian lens; that Berlin "seems to have stated the conflict of goods as though it were written into the goods themselves. Whereas I think it arises from the complexity and limitations of human life" (p. 117). While Taylor was critical of Berlin's limited opportunity-concept of positive liberty and his overlooking of the communal and cultural contexts that shape individual identities and values, he did agree with Berlin's pluralism as a resulting characteristic of human life.

**Predisposition to Relativism.** Related to monist and communitarian critiques is the further argument that Berlin's rejection of a unified moral framework leaves us with a relativistic stance that lacks the normative force necessary for moral judgments. The accusation that Berlin's pluralism slips into relativism is identified by those such as Crowder (2020), Ferrell (2008), and Gray (2013). Although Berlin was critical of relativism and worked to differentiate it from his value pluralism as discussed previously, there are questions as to whether he was successful in that endeavor. Crowder (2020) described how this concern arises from Berlin's inclusion of a holistic understanding of pluralism, which stresses the incommensurability of whole systems of value such as those of civilizations, historical periods, or cultures. If this holistic inter-cultural incommensurability exists, then there is no standard by which cultures can be ranked and no basis for criticism outside of its own context (p. 25). This appears to those such as Rorty (1989) or Sandel (1984) to leave Berlin open to allegations of sliding into relativism.

Sandel (1984), for example, stated that "Although Berlin is not strictly speaking a relativist - he affirms the ideal of freedom of choice - his position comes perilously close to foundering on the relativist predicament.... In a tragically-configured moral universe, such as Berlin assumes, is the ideal of freedom of choice any less subject than competing ideals to the ultimate incommensurability of values? If so, in what can its privileged status consist?" (p. 8). As such, Sandel concluded that Berlin's value of freedom of choice is just one particular value among many and there is no single overriding universal quality of human nature with which to address profound value conflicts.

Rorty (1989) provided another assessment of Berlin's propensity for relativism in the context of responding to Sandel's criticism. Rorty agreed with Berlin's condemnation of monism and, as such, interprets Berlin's theories of value pluralism and liberalism as being rooted in local contexts. However, that is as direct as Rorty got in terms of addressing the claim. Consistent with his postmodern neopragmatic epistemology, Rorty (1989) concluded that the question of whether or not Berlin's position is relativistic "should not be answered, but rather evaded... We should see allegiance to social institutions as no more matters for justification by reference to familiar, commonly accepted premises - but also as no more arbitrary - than choices of friends or heroes. Such choices are not made by reference to criteria (p. 54).

**Pragmatic Limitations.** A final concern with Berlin's work has been its perceived absence of a comprehensive moral or political theory that provides a systemic method for resolving conflicts. This concern is summarized by Gray (2013) who described an implication of Berlin's value pluralism as precluding a "developed morality" from "having a hierarchical structure, such that practical dilemmas are decided by the application of a set of principles (p. 106). As such, in his reluctance to endorse any form of moral hierarchy with which to judge between competing claims of justice or human rights, Berlin fails to provide any practical direction for mediating between conflicting values or navigating moral dilemmas in practice. Gray's assessment of this deficit did not reflect his disagreement with Berlin's conclusions but rather highlighted a pragmatic limitation of Berlin's pluralism.

**Summary.** In part 1 of this chapter, I reviewed the extant literature related to Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism, toleration, and positive and negative liberty. This

included an exploration of the incommensurability of values, the existence of limited universal values, the plurality of legitimate values, and the contrasting of pluralism with monism and relativism. It concluded with a discussion of the major critiques of Berlin's value pluralism. The next part of this chapter will examine key historical and contemporary moral education approaches.

## **Part 2: Historical and Contemporary Approaches to Moral Education**

Since this study aimed to uncover the nature of moral education in Alberta and examine how it addresses the pluralist nature of society, it is important to understand how moral education has been approached elsewhere and how those approaches address the issue of value pluralism in society. In this section, I briefly summarize the contemporary moral education approaches common to North America, paying particular attention to their underlying educational and moral assumptions.

Common critiques of each approach are also discussed. It is worth noting that the distinctions among the various approaches that will be discussed may exist more in theory than in practice. As Althof and Berkowitz (2006) concluded, fostering the development of moral citizens in democratic societies necessitates a focus on moral development, broader moral and related character development, teaching of civics, and the development of citizenship skills and dispositions. Moreover, these outcomes overlap and cut across the fields of moral, character and citizenship education" (p. 495).

The five moral education approaches discussed include the 1) religious-spiritual approach, 2) character education (virtue-ethics) approach, 3) care-ethic approach, 4) values clarification, and 5) cognitive-developmental approach. This section concludes

with a discussion of value monist and relativist elements of the various moral education approaches.

### ***Religious–Spiritual Approach***

A strong commitment to moral education was common amongst the European settlers of North America, and it was grounded in the Christian traditions of the first immigrants (McClellan, 1999). As such, the first approach to moral education is also the most enduring, that being religious education. Although the moral education of children occurred primarily in the church and home, the first schools were established in the 1600s by churches to further support the moral development of students (McClellan, 1999). Valk (2007) referred to this as the sacred public school, in which religion was central to education with little distinction between morality in general and the dominant Protestant or Catholic religions.

Early religious education in North America focused on the inculcation of values and behaviours that were interpreted from the Biblical doctrine. Students learned through devotions and the study of the religions' catechism. Discipline was strict and structured to reinforce behaviour that would be approved by God. Students were first exposed to the teachings of the Bible through listening, but as they got older, they would learn to read passages of the Bible and then undertake more formalized Bible study, receiving instruction in the doctrines of the faith and values of society (McClellan, 1999).

Arthur (2008) described two approaches to moral education within the Christian tradition. One approach involves beginning with learning about church scripture or doctrine and then moving deductively to contemporary moral issues. The second approach involves moving inductively from contemporary issues to doctrinal or scriptural

affirmations. In both approaches, the child's moral development is viewed as interconnected with their enculturation into the faith.

Meta-ethical and normative assumptions underlying the religious–spiritual approach to education are grounded in the meta-physical claims of the particular religion; however, common to all is a belief that there is a supernatural source of morality combined with the element of judgement. Normative assumptions of what is right and wrong are grounded within the particular religious worldviews. For the major Western religions, as well as Islam, normative assumptions are generally absolute and universal in nature (Valk, 2007).

**Critiques of Religious Education.** Critics of religious education include those who disagree with its metaphysical basis. In addition, with the increase in cultural and religious diversity, educational models grounded in a singular worldview are viewed as problematic, and more liberal and neutral models for education are desired (Valk, 2007).

***Character Education (Virtue Ethics) Approach***

The character education movement in North America originally arose early in the twentieth century North America in an attempt to preserve traditional values and ensure a place for moral education in secular public schools (Arthur, 2008). The early virtues cultivated in character education included virtues such as politeness, gentleness, kindness, truthfulness, duty, obedience, nobility, respect, reverence, gratitude, thankfulness, honesty, honour, courage, humility, self-respect, self-control, prudence, industry, and economy (Northwest Territories Department of Education, 1903, p. 79). These virtues were typically viewed as traditional values that were believed to be beneficial for meeting the challenges of modern life (McClellan, 1999).



Character education was the dominant approach to moral education until the 1960s, but it experienced a resurgence in popularity in the last two decades of the twentieth century, becoming the most common contemporary approach to moral education in North America (McKenzie, 2005). McKenzie attributed this to a perceived increase in social problems faced by children and youth, as well as the resulting mandates in many American states. The emphasis on virtues was, and is, a key defining element of the character education approach, as can be seen in the works of Lickona (2004) and Borba (2001).

Because of its emphasis on virtues, the traditional character education approach is sometimes referred to as the virtue ethics or virtue education approach (Arthur & Carr, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2013). The determination of what constitutes a virtue and which virtues to focus on are important decisions for contemporary character educators. For example, Duckworth (2016) focuses on a combination of passion and perseverance that she terms grit. Lickona and Davidson (2005) distinguished between what they categorized as moral virtues needed for successful interpersonal relationships and ethical behaviour and performance virtues needed to realize one's potential for excellence. Baehr (2017) argued for an expanded model of virtues that added two additional categories of virtues. The first were civic virtues that are seen as strengths of a good citizen, focusing on distinctively civic goods such as the well-being of society as a whole. The second were intellectual virtues viewed as strengths of a good thinker or learner focusing on epistemic goods like truth or understanding (p. 1156).

Baehr's (2017) focus on intellectual virtues stems from his connection to the characteristics of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 350B.C.E./1980). This

philosophical focus is representative of an evolution of character education to include approaches that Kristjánsson (2015) and Curren (2013) have labelled Aristotelian or neo-Aristotelian character education.

While still grounded in beliefs of moral universalism and moral progressivism consistent with traditional character education, neo-Aristotelian character education is a more nuanced approach. For example, Kristjánsson's (2015, 2020) framework has two primary distinctions drawn directly from Aristotle (350B.C.E./1980): a focus on *Eudemonia*, or human flourishing, as the ultimate aim of education and an emphasis on *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, in determining how to flourish.

Eudemonia, or human flourishing, as viewed in the classical Aristotelian sense, is the highest good for all human beings. Aristotle believed that eudemonia was primarily achieved through living a life in which they cultivate and practice living in accordance with moral virtues such as justice, courage, temperance, and intellectual virtues such as wisdom and understanding (Aristotle, 350B.C.E./1980).

The concept of eudemonia in neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics has evolved to include an expanded view of flourishing. For example, Kristjánsson (2014, 2015) integrated character education with the field of positive psychology. Positive psychology, as espoused by Seligman (2011), focuses on optimal personal functioning instead of merely the absence of mental illness or impairment. Kristjánsson (2014, 2015) has incorporated optimal psychological functioning into his concept of human flourishing, expanding it beyond just living with virtue. This expansion includes Kristjánsson's (2016) advocacy for the inclusion of emotional elements in the conceptualizing of human flourishing. He

has further argued that flourishing may be distinct from virtue and that it is possible to be virtuous without flourishing or to flourish without being virtuous (Kristjánsson, 2020).

Phronesis, often translated as practical wisdom, is described as the intellectual virtue that enables individuals to make good decisions about how to live a virtuous and flourishing life. Phronesis involves the ability to deliberate about what is good and beneficial for oneself and others in specific situations and guide virtuous action in real-world contexts. Classical phronesis involves deliberation about how to achieve virtuous ends. For Aristotle, this often meant seeking the mean between excess and deficiency in our actions and emotions (Aristotle, 350B.C.E./1980). Similar to the conceptualization of human flourishing, views of phronesis have also evolved.

Kristjánsson (2014, 2015) defined phronesis as “the wisdom to adjudicate the relative weight of different virtues in conflict situations and to reach a measured verdict about best courses of action” (p. 88). He also argued for the cultivation of emotional virtues and the role of practical wisdom in integrating emotions into moral decision-making. In doing so, Kristjánsson lamented traditional character education’s overemphasis on the habituation phase of moral development and argued that the cultivation of practical wisdom is the ultimate goal of virtue ethics, but one which is often neglected or minimized in practice.

Curren (2013) also proposed a neo-Aristotelian view of character education that parallels that of Kristjánsson in its emphasis on practical reason but is seen through a lens of supporting the development of the student as an autonomous individual. Whereas Kristjánsson bridged elements of positive psychology with traditional virtue education, Curren incorporated elements of self-determination theory with virtue-ethics. In doing so,

he advocated for a view of flourishing grounded in the meeting of self-determination theory's universal psychological needs, specifically: competence, autonomy, and relatedness.

From a developmental psychological perspective, Lickona (2004) argued that character, or locus of morality, resides internal to the individual as a set of virtues or traits which are defined heteronomously or outside the individual. Normatively, traditional character education makes the assumption that the nature of morality is absolute and that virtues that are universal can be identified that transcend cultures (Lickona, 2004). Advocates of character education generally share a belief in the existence of universal moral principles or values that transcend cultures. For example, Cafo and Sumuncuo (2000) argued that morality is not a relative phenomenon and that universal moral values always exist across different cultures. Lickona (2004) stated that regardless of religion, race, or language, common values can be established upon the basis of being human. Proponents of character education often cite the existence of "the golden rule" or its equivalent within all of the major religions as the prime example of a universal moral standard. This assumption has been a consistent characteristic of virtue-ethics; however, there has yet to be any consensus in the field as to what those universal virtues are.

**Critiques of Character Education.** Character education, or virtue ethics, is the dominant approach to moral education and has the most robust breadth of critiques. One critique of character education is that it is predisposed to supporting or reinforcing dominant power structures in society (Burns, 2007; Yu, 2004). Character educators such as Bennett (1992) believe that the maintenance of cultural differences among coexisting groups erodes the fundamental values that are necessary for a cohesive society (Bennett,

1992). Yu (2004) argued that this yearning for traditional values is actually reflective of a conservative bias, in which traditional values are those espoused by those in positions of dominance as if they apply to all. In this light, character education can be viewed as a means for those in positions of dominance to maintain the status quo. Burns (2007) and Yu (2004) view character education's emphasis on obedience as a means to legitimize the preservation of those in positions of dominance. By offering the values of the dominant class as universal traditional values, character educators gain support for the fostering of obedience and control to reinforce those values. Yu (2004) expressed further concerns that the views of traditional character education advocates are highly aligned to a conservative Judeo-Christian belief system.

Traditional character education has also been criticized for its lack of a guiding principle for defining what virtues are worthy of espousal. Smith (2022, p.891) states his concern that "justification is seldom offered for any particular selection" of virtues. Turiel (1983) argued that this lack of criteria for justification often results in the incorrect assumption that a community consensus on what are considered virtues is valid. This was supported by Carr (2000) who argued that what often appears to be general value agreement between individuals or groups in principle may dissipate at the level of particular interpretation and specific application.

In one of the first and broadest studies of character done, Hartshorne and May (1928, 1930) found that

the consistency with which he [an individual] is honest or dishonest is a function of the situations he is placed in so far as (1) these situations have common

elements; (2) he has learned to be honest or dishonest in them; and (3) he has become aware of their honest or dishonest implications or consequences. (p. 380)

This situational nature of morality is further supported by Yu (2004), who argued that a virtue like honesty could look different in different situations. Both Zimbardo (2007) and Smith (2022) agreed with this concern, providing the Stanford prison experiment as an example of morality's tendency to be governed by situational variables. Yu summarized the problem that in assuming the universality of virtues, character educators often ignore the contextual nature of morality and, as such, ignore any element of reasoning necessary to develop morally.

Carr (1991) argued that abstract virtues and moral action in specific situations require bridging by the use of moral reasoning, and, without this element of moral reasoning, individuals lack the tools to reconcile dilemmas in which virtues conflict. Because the character education approach often emphasizes behaviour management, Carr (1991) questioned any transference to moral thought, suggesting that a person who demonstrates fewer negative behaviours may just be better conditioned to do so to avoid punishment. Kohn (1997) echoed this criticism, arguing that character educators frequently focus on behaviours that make students easier to teach rather than developing students' moral and ethical reasoning. He provided an example of teaching a version of respect that is interpreted as obedience to authority within a class or school. Unthinking obedience is not a virtue, and, according to Kohn, a character education program identified as successful may merely be effective at creating more obedient students but fail to create a thinking moral person. Burns (2007) further illuminated the distinction between obedience and morality with the example of a person raised to respect authority

uncritically who would consider doing what others would deem immoral if instructed to do so by an authority figure. In this way, the pedagogical critique overlaps with the philosophical concerns about obedience.

Gutmann (1999) expressed concerns about character education's ability to prepare students for democracy. She argued that character education often emphasizes the instilling of specific virtues or traits rather than encouraging critical thinking and moral reasoning. Gutmann stated, "When character education emphasizes strict adherence to particular virtues without room for questioning or critical discussion, it risks promoting an authoritarian model of education that is contrary to democratic values" (p. 56). Gutmann also expressed concern that character education can inadvertently exclude diverse cultural and moral perspectives by imposing a uniform set of values, whereas "democratic education must be inclusive and open to a variety of cultural and moral perspectives, rather than imposing a single moral framework" (p. 102).

Bickmore (2014) also questioned character education's ability to prepare students for active democratic citizenship. She argued that character education often focuses narrowly on individual traits, while neglecting broader social and political contexts which can "inadvertently reinforce existing social hierarchies by emphasizing personal responsibility over collective action and systemic change" (p. 45). Bickmore also challenged character education's emphasis on reinforcing existing societal and social norms rather than "empowering students to critically examine and challenge social norms" (p. 61).

In summary, character education has expanded and evolved to include the traditional approach and the more contemporary neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics approach.

Underlying both is the assumption that universal values or virtues can be identified. Critiques about this assumption and concerns about indoctrination are two of the key critiques of character education, but it remains a prevalent moral education approach today.

### ***Care–Ethic Approach***

The care-ethic approach arose in response to Kohlberg's (1981) cognitive-developmental approach. Gilligan (1982) found differences between men and women in their ethical reasoning, with women attending more to the effects of actions on relationships, showing greater interest in the context of moral decisions, being more concerned with real versus hypothetical dilemmas, and justifying moral decisions based on empathy and compassion. As such, Gilligan, and more recently, Noddings (1988, 2002, 2008), have contended that a “feminine” ethic of care can and should replace the rational emphasis on the morality of justice as espoused by Kohlberg. This emphasis on caring provided a different primary moral good.

The care–ethic theorizes that morality can be considered a developmental process. Gilligan (1982) identified three stages to the development of a care ethic. The first stage, survival orientation, is characterized by care for self, in which the individual's primary concern is for their own survival and protection from hurt. The second stage, conventional care, is characterized by a fusion of responsibility for others and a desire to protect or ensure care for others who are dependent and unequal. The third stage, integrated care, consists of an appreciation of the interconnection of self and others, resulting in a universal concern for relationships and condemnation of exploitation and hurt.



While it arose from the cognitive-developmental approach, Noddings (2002) care ethic approach more closely resembles the virtue ethics approach with a targeted focus on relationships and restructuring of curriculum around themes of care, such as care for self, others, the natural environment, and the human-made world. Noddings (2008) advocated strongly for the fostering of caring relationships built primarily through modeling, dialogue, practical experiences, and confirmation. Noddings (1994, 2002) also advocated for the teaching and use of conversation in schools as a means of building caring relationships.

The care-ethic approach is premised on the assumption that universal moral principles do exist. Gilligan (1982) centred “moral development around the understanding of responsibility and relationships” (p. 19) and Noddings’ (2008) refined approach placed caring relationships at the heart of moral education as a primary moral good or universal value.

**Critiques of the Care-ethic Approach.** One critique of the care-ethic approach relates to its reliance on relationships as the foundation of morality. Callan (1995) argued that similar views are necessary prerequisites for relationships, and that radically differing views prevent the formation of truly caring relationships. These views are also likely to be at the heart of significant moral issues, indicating that the caring approach cannot provide a means of dealing with significant moral dilemmas.

Another critique of Noddings’ care ethics is that it may unintentionally privilege close personal relationships over impartiality in moral judgment. Care for those with whom one has close relationships may be prioritized, potentially at the expense of those outside one's immediate circle. This could create ethical dilemmas where caring for

someone in a close relationship may not align with caring for a broader community or adhering to principles of fairness (Held, 2006).

### ***Values Clarification Approach***

Raths et al.'s (1966) values clarification approach arose in a time where traditional character education approaches were in decline and cultural relativism was working its way into mainstream education (McClellan, 1999). Values clarification (Raths et al., 1966) aimed to help students freely choose their values in a non-indoctrinating and nonjudgmental manner after thoughtful consideration of the consequences of each. Teachers are not to impose any external standards for the selection of students' values as students engage in the processes of choosing, prizing and acting (p. 30). In fact, Simon and DeSherbinin (1975) went so far as to describe external judgment as harmful to the moral development of an individual. As previously discussed, this is in direct contradiction to the views of character educators. The developers of values clarification outlined a number of specific methods by which students are to identify their personal values. The first method was referred to by Raths et al. (1966) as the clarifying response in which dialogue is used in which teachers ask students questions intended to help them clarify their values (p. 51). The second method is a process of written response that uses value sheets with descriptions of dilemmas and accompanying questions intended to be answered privately (p. 83). Other methods include interactive activities, including group discussions and role playing. (p. 112). Raths, Harmon, and Simon (1966) emphasized that the purpose of discussion in values clarification is to determine what one thinks for oneself through the sharing of ideas, not attempting to resolve a dilemma through rational confrontation.

Some key assumptions underlying values clarification differ from those of character education and the cognitive-developmental approach. Chazan (1985) argued that values clarification assumes diversity to be culturally or socially acceptable. This view differs significantly from character education's standard for moral conduct as defined by one or more virtues. The acceptance of value diversity results in a learning a process focussed on the act of valuing, not one set of fixed values. The assumption of value diversity also results in the student being viewed as an autonomous agent. A final assumption of a meta-ethical nature held by proponents of values clarification is that moral decision-making is personal and situational in nature (Simon & DeSherbinin, 1975).

**Critiques of the Value Clarification Approach.** Numerous critics have identified what they believe to be key weaknesses in values clarification. The first critique is that values clarification educates about morality, not for morality. Carr (2008) was critical of what he described as an attempt to create “embryo moral philosophers” (p. 99) by focusing too heavily on the intellectual and theoretical aspects of moral education at the expense of practical and experiential learning. Carr argued that engaging primarily in abstract reasoning and ethical theory neglects the importance of cultivating character through the modeling of moral behavior by educators and habituating moral virtues through real-life practice. He further argued that “by emphasizing abstract principles and theoretical ethical debates, there is a risk of producing individuals who can discuss moral issues eloquently yet lack the practical wisdom and character to act upon these principles in real-life situations” (p. 158)

A second significant critique of values clarification stems from the belief that it inappropriately sees the student as an autonomous agent in the role of determining which values she believes to be important. Critics, such as Bennett (1992), Kilpatrick (1992), and Lockwood (1976) argued that values clarification encourages moral relativism by its acceptance of all moral positions as equally valid and justifiable and provides no sense of how to deal with moral conflict or establish moral priorities. By focusing on individual preference without providing a framework for evaluating the moral worth of those preferences, values clarification is criticized for leaving students without a clear sense of right and wrong. Lickona (1991) described its “reluctance to affirm any set of moral absolutes” as leaving “students without the moral compass needed to navigate complex ethical dilemmas” (p. 36). Burns (2007) shared this concern in outlining how a liberal democracy cannot abide by all beliefs. He argued, using the conflict between free speech and toleration as an example, that some moral stances must be confronted, even suppressed, to ensure the continuity of society. Kirschenbaum et al. (1977) responded to these critics, arguing that although values clarification seeks to promote autonomy by having students form values that are personally satisfying, it also seeks to promote justice by having students form values that are socially constructive. However, Strike (1990) argued that by holding the students as autonomous in determining which values are socially constructive, “values clarification makes all moral principles into values and values into matters of personal preference” (p. 211). Kirschenbaum (2000), one of the original pioneers of values clarification, later described the “fatal flaw in values clarification” (p. 12): it took traditional values for granted, assuming that, given a chance to examine alternatives, people would ultimately make good and responsible choices.

### *Cognitive–Developmental Approach*

Kohlberg's (1975, 1981, 1984) cognitive–developmental approach, also known as “justice reasoning” (Gilligan, 1982), is built on the previous work of Piaget (1965).

Kohlberg (1975) identified a series of six stages of sequenced constructions of a sense of justice. These stages are assumed to be universal in nature and sequence, and each level represents a fundamental shift in the social-moral perspective of the individual.

Progression through these stages is dependent on cognitive capacity. At the first level, the pre-conventional level, a person's moral judgments are characterized by a concrete, individual perspective. Stage one is a heteronomous orientation, which focuses on avoiding punishment. Stage two is characterized by the emergence of moral reciprocity, when one follows the rules only when it is in one's own immediate interest. Stage 3 is the conventional level of reasoning, in which children are aware of shared feelings, agreements, and expectations that take primacy over individual interests, but this perspective relates only to the local community or family. Stage 4 marks the shift to defining right in terms of society's laws and norms. Stages five and six mark the transition to the post-conventional level and involve understanding and application of fairness principles (Kohlberg, 1984).

The cognitive–developmental approach seeks to promote the development of children's and adolescents' moral reasoning abilities in school settings. Key pedagogical approaches include moral dilemma discussions, which entail facilitated peer-group discussions of open-ended ethical dilemmas. The student responses to these dilemmas are then judged on the quality of their moral reasoning, not the appropriateness of their position. In this way, the cognitive-development approach shares with values clarification

an emphasis on the process of moral decision-making. Advocates of the cognitive-developmental approach also share supporters of values clarification's fear of indoctrination that both groups see in traditional character education efforts (Kohlberg, 1981; Raths et al., 1966). Kohlberg (1984) later introduced a more expansive and complex approach, labelled the Just Community School, in which small democracies are created to explicitly focus on promoting justice and community.

A further refinement in cognitive–developmental moral theory, domain theory, was first developed by Elliot Turiel (1983) and more recently espoused by Nucci (2009). Domain theory draws a distinction between the child's developing concepts of morality and social convention. Morality is structured by concepts of harm, welfare, and fairness and addresses situations in which actions have effects on another person, whether social rules exist or not. In contrast, issues of social convention have no intrinsic interpersonal consequences beyond socially agreed-upon norms. Turiel's work led to the view that by focusing on issues of moral understanding, public schools may engage in fostering children's morality in a manner consistent with differing religious beliefs.

From a meta-ethical perspective, the cognitive–developmental approach reflects the view that the nature of morality is situational and that the requirements of justice vary given the context. However, the cognitive-developmental approach is also grounded in the assumption that an adequate morality will enable individuals to “make judgments in terms of universal principles applicable to all people” (Kohlberg, 1975, p. 50).

The presumption that Kohlberg's grounding of the stages of development in justice is similar to character educators' assumptions about the universal nature of virtues and the care-ethic's assumption of the universality of caring relationships. However, the

cognitive-developmental approach emphasizes moral reasoning, and all rules or laws are evaluated in terms of their coherence with basic principles of justice or fairness instead of being upheld based on their perceived importance to the community or society.

**Critiques of the Cognitive-Developmental Approach.** The most significant critique of the cognitive–developmental approach relates to its narrow emphasis on reasoning. For example, Ryan (1981) and Strike (1990) argued that dealing with difficult theoretical dilemmas represents only a small part of moral conduct, neglecting the problem of motivation and any focus on action. As a result, students are likely to develop a sophisticated ability to rationalize their actions without being inspired to act morally. Kohlberg (1984) himself recognized that “while a child's cognitive stage may determine the upper limits of his moral judgments, it does not necessarily determine the nature of his moral actions” (p. 498).

A second critique of the cognitive-developmental approach addresses a concern about the pedagogical use of the stages of moral development. Burns (2007) expressed the concern that the emphasis on the cognitive process leaves teachers and students at risk of confounding disagreement with poor reasoning. This is potentially problematic because of the power differential that exists in the teacher-student relationship.

A final critique of the cognitive-developmental approach is the concern that it is biased. As discussed previously, Gilligan (1982) argued that the Kohlbergian conception of morality had a masculine bias. In addition, Oldenquist (1979) found Kohlberg's hypothetical dilemmas to be “packed with moral content that flows from his ideals of liberalism, participatory democracy, sexual freedom and children's rights” (p. 243). As a result, the very neutrality underlying values clarification was in question.

### *Monism and Relativism in Moral Education Approaches.*

When reviewing the features of the various moral education approaches, several differences are noted in their determination of the good. With regard to what is right and wrong, religious education, character education, and cognitive–developmental approaches are based on the existence of absolutes. The religious approach is grounded in a singular worldview with a supernatural source of virtue. Within character education, although the nature of the universal virtues may differ amongst advocates, the approach is premised upon the existence of universal virtues that serve the good society. In the case of the cognitive–developmental approach, an overarching universal principle of justice resides at the heart. For advocates of the care–ethic approach, the universal good does not distinguish between right and wrong, but care ethicists take a monist view in establishing caring relationships as the universal good that requires precedence over all others.

Regardless of whether an advocated ideal is a particular religious worldview, the primacy of caring relationships, justice, or some character educator’s view of the good life, this existence of differently defined overarching universal goods illustrates one of the critical challenges inherent within moral education, pluralism. These differences exist not only among the overarching universal goods defined by each of these approaches, but they can also be seen within each. For example, Borba (2001), Hébert and Wilkinson (2001), Kidder (1994), Kinnier, Kernes, and Dautheribes (2000), and Lickona (2004) each offered different lists of what they argued should be considered universal virtues. In some instances, these virtues are viewed as traditional in nature, drawn from a belief in a better world in our past (Lickona, 2004). Other virtues are defined in terms of a better future (Kidder, 1994). The existence of plural utopic visions has an obvious impact on the



perceived goals of education, especially when considered in conjunction with multiple views of the present. The closer one's assessment of the present context is to that of their defined ideal, the more inclined one would be to advocate for maintaining the status quo. For those who deemed the current context further from their ideal, a change agenda would be viewed more positively (Yu, 2004). Regardless, they are all grounded in a monistic belief in a singular best way, and choosing one may exclude the others.

The values clarification approach can be sharply contrasted with the monistic views of the other approaches in that it is grounded in both cultural and individual relativism. Values clarification advocates view issues of right and wrong as being defined individually with universal definitions of the good being impossible (Kirschenbaum et al., 1977; Raths et al., 1966). As discussed earlier, value clarification's acceptance or embracement of relativism has been a major focus for critique, with some even categorizing it as amoral for its failure to endorse a particular set of moral values (Burns, 2007; Lockwood, 1976; Strike, 1990), but it does offer a clear alternative to the monist views of the other approaches.

### *Summary*

In part 2 of the literature review, I discussed the major historical and contemporary approaches to moral education in North America, paying particular attention to the assumptions underlying each. The review of moral education approaches concluded with an identification of the approaches' often monist or relativist natures. Albeit for different reasons, the examination of assumptions underlying the various moral education approaches clearly revealed the pluralistic nature of the moral world. The values clarification approach explicitly embraces a plurality of values. The other

approaches, while they may be monistic in nature, showed variation in their conceptions of what is good or desirable, which also highlights society's inherent pluralism. This brings to the forefront the challenge facing moral educators: teaching morality in a world of multiple moralities. With that challenge in mind, as well as the research questions focused on identifying 1) the nature and scope of kindergarten through grade 12 moral education policies in Alberta and exploring how Alberta's kindergarten through grade 12 moral education policies address the pluralistic nature of Alberta's society, I will now outline a conceptual framework for pluralist moral education that will be used to inform this study.

### **Part 3: Isaiah Berlin and Moral Education**

In literature, Isaiah Berlin has not been frequently associated with moral education. He was not a moral philosopher but was more commonly thought of as a political philosopher or historian of ideas (Jahanbegloo, 2007). However Berlin himself stated that "political philosophy is in essence moral philosophy applied to social situations" (Jahanbegloo, 2007, p. 46). While Berlin didn't address moral education himself, others have attempted to apply Berlin's thinking to moral education.

Burtonwood (2006) discussed the application of Berlin's pluralism to moral education and identified two key challenges with the teaching of values and some possible options for addressing them. The first challenge was identifying what to teach given an acceptance of pluralism and a rejection of monism. The second challenge was how to negotiate conflicts between group and individual autonomy.

In addressing the first challenge, Burtonwood (2006) emphasized the importance of teaching universal values, such as freedom, justice, and respect, which are necessary

for peaceful coexistence. However, he also stressed the need for educators to demonstrate toleration in respecting the plurality of legitimate values that differ from these universal ones. He did, however, caution that respecting and negotiating between different moral perspectives needed to avoid defaulting to relativism or imposing a single worldview.

With the second challenge, Burtonwood (2006) highlighted a crucial tension in pluralist societies: the conflict between group autonomy, such as that of cultural or religious groups, and individual autonomy, which he described as the rights of individuals to make their own moral decisions. He provided cases where group rights and cultural preservation may conflict with the individual's right to self-determination. The key issue in such situations is a tension between group-based and individual-based autonomy and tolerance.

Burtonwood suggested an approach to moral education that prepares students to engage in dialogue and negotiation when conflicts arise between individual and group values. For example, one approach that prioritizes group-based autonomy and tolerance is offered by Halstead and Pike (2006). They proposed a citizenship approach to moral education that had three elements: (a) common citizenship education for all encouraging political participation in society, (b) education for cultural attachment grounded in the values of the cultural group to which the student belongs, and (c) education for cross-cultural understanding in which students would learn about the values of other cultural groups. This approach makes no attempt to integrate or resolve conflicting beliefs and is consistent with the emphasis on toleration previously identified in pluralist liberalism.

Steutel and Spiecker (2004) made a distinction between private and public morality and

advocated for a principle of non-interference that appears to be grounded in Berlin's (1958/2008) negative liberty.

MacIntyre (2007) argued that attempts to use consensus within a pluralistic environment will produce values that are too thin to be valuable for moral education. This argument is grounded in his belief that substantive differences in moral traditions exist which require serious rational inquiry that might result in one tradition "suffering defeat at the hands of another" (MacIntyre, 2007, p. xiv). MacIntyre acknowledged that although rational inquiry may not lead to any definitive resolution of conflicting moral traditions, "what matters most is that such issues can on occasion be decided" (2007, p. xiv).

Wringe (2000) argued that because there can be no ultimate teleology to which all our actions contribute, an approach that begins with a prescriptive list of values must be avoided. Instead, he argued for a focus on the virtue of moral independence, which is derived from an understanding and recognition of negative liberty. De Ruyter (2003) also recognized the need to avoid a pursuit of a singular ideal, arguing that moral education needs to teach about how people identify, become, and remain committed to their ideals. Heyting (2004) agreed somewhat with De Ruyter but advocated even stronger caution against the defending of ideals. She argued that De Ruyter's faith in actors' ability and propensity to rationally and normatively reflect on their ideals to ensure they meet moral criteria is likely to be insufficient to "prevent disasters from happening" (Heyting, 2004, p. 244) and suggested it would be more appropriate to focus on realistic goals.

Weinstein (2004), also in acceptance of the plural and incommensurate nature of values, advocated for an approach that emphasizes exposing students to multiple moral

perspectives. He argued that students need to learn to deal with the cognitive conflict created by understanding that choices between competing goods are necessary and do not necessarily resolve moral problems.

While not extensive, the examples provided in this section illustrate the relevance of Berlin's value pluralism to moral education. Berlin's moral pluralism provides a well-grounded alternative to the monistic and relativistic approaches to moral education and their underlying assumptions. As such, the lens of moral or value pluralism provides a valuable means through which to examine moral education policies in Alberta and potentially offer direction or guidance for moral educators and policymakers. The next section outlines the conceptual framework for this study that integrates Berlin's value pluralism into a framework of assumptions underlying moral education approaches.

### ***Conceptual Framework for Pluralist Moral Education***

In approaching moral education through Berlin's pluralist lens, it is reasonable to conclude that one of the key aims of moral education is not just to impart a universal set of values on students but to engage them and develop their ability to navigate the complexity of diverse moral perspectives. To outline one vision for what that might look like, in this section, I present the conceptual framework for this study that integrates key elements of Berlin's pluralism into a framework for moral education developed by Sanger and Osguthorpe's (2005). Table 1 provides a visual overview of the conceptual framework for pluralist moral education.

**Table 1***Conceptual Framework for Pluralist Moral Education*

| Category of Underlying Assumptions                     | Meta-ethical Assumptions   | Normative Moral Assumptions   | Educational Assumptions  |
|--|--|---|--|
| Defining Question(s) of Category                       | What is the nature and structure of moral values in a pluralist society?   | What is or ought to be considered good, right, or virtuous in a pluralist society?  | What is or ought to be taught relative to moral education in a pluralist society?  |
| Elements of Berlin's Value Pluralism within Categories | <p>Pluralism is the fundamental nature of the moral world, as opposed to monism or relativism</p> <p>Incommensurability of values leads to agonistic conflicts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inherent - conflicts between values themselves</li> <li>• Internal - conflicts within an individual</li> <li>• Interpersonal - conflicts between individuals</li> <li>• Intergroup/Intercultural - conflicts between groups</li> </ul> <p>Universal values may exist but they are not absolute</p> | <p>Plurality of legitimate (but potentially incommensurable) values exist</p> <p>Universal values (which may still conflict) exist which are in the interest of all human beings such as: freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, love</p> <p>Toleration is an essential value (that still conflicts with others) in a pluralist society</p> | <p>Importance of striving for a minimum threshold of negative liberty to pursue universal values</p> <p>Importance of Toleration</p> <p>How to negotiate conflicts within and between individuals and groups</p> |

Sanger and Osguthorpe's (2005) moral work of teaching framework provides a comprehensive way of understanding the underlying assumptions that shape different approaches to moral education. Their framework highlights three key dimensions

relevant to this study: educational assumptions, meta-ethical assumptions, and normative moral assumptions. These dimensions help explain how various moral education approaches are grounded in fundamental beliefs about the nature of morality, human development, and the purpose of education. The key elements of Berlin's value pluralism were discussed in part 1 of this chapter. I will now describe how those elements can be integrated into Sanger and Osguthorpe's framework to create a framework for pluralist moral education that will provide a basis for addressing the research questions.

Educational Assumptions focus on the assumptions about the aims and goals of education, particularly moral education. Different approaches to moral education make implicit assumptions about what educators aim to achieve with their students. For example, some approaches prioritize the development of moral reasoning, while others emphasize the habituation of performance and character virtues, or the social and emotional aspects of morality. Sanger and Osguthorpe (2005) emphasized that how educators understand the purpose of education, specifically moral education, has a significant impact on the methods they employ.

In a pluralist society, the role of education is, or ought to be, to prepare students to navigate and negotiate moral conflicts both within themselves and in relation to others. In a pluralist context, this means acknowledging that values conflict across individuals, groups, and cultures. Burtonwood (2006) asserted that this negotiation of conflicts is one of the key challenges for moral education in a pluralist society. Education, therefore, should aim not to eliminate these differences but to provide tools for resolving conflicts peacefully and respectfully. Aiming for a minimal threshold of negative liberty that allows for the pursuit of universal values such as freedom, justice, and honesty, which are

in the interest of all human beings, also fits into this dimension, as does a focus on toleration.

Berlin argues that human values are plural, incommensurable, and often conflicting, and no single moral doctrine can encompass all of them. This leads to the final key educational goal to be identified here: fostering tolerance. Students must learn that even though values conflict, this does not delegitimize the values themselves. Toleration, therefore, becomes an essential component of moral education, as it teaches individuals to respect differing values without necessarily accepting or agreeing with them. Educators should aim to cultivate an environment where students can explore their own values freely while also understanding the legitimacy of others' values.

Meta-ethical Assumptions pertains to assumptions about the nature and structure of moral values themselves. Meta-ethical assumptions address questions such as: Are moral values objective and universal, or are they relative and culturally specific? As identified in the literature review, different moral education approaches are based on different meta-ethical assumptions. Understanding these assumptions helps educators and scholars recognize the foundations of each approach.

Berlin's value pluralism provides a meta-ethical foundation for moral education in pluralist societies by emphasizing the incommensurability of moral values. According to Berlin, values are not only plural but often in agonistic conflict with one another. They may be inherently, internally, interpersonally, or interculturally incommensurable.

Inherent incommensurability refers to conflicts between values themselves, such as liberty versus equality, or within values, such as positive versus negative liberty. These values cannot always be harmonized, and pursuing one may come at the cost of the other.



Internal incommensurability occurs within the individual, where agonistic conflicts arise between personal values. For example, an individual might value both personal freedom and social responsibility, but these values can come into conflict requiring difficult personal choices. Interpersonal incommensurability refers to value conflicts between individuals, each of whom may prioritize different values in their moral lives. Intergroup or intercultural incommensurability occurs when different cultural or social groups hold conflicting values, leading to agonistic struggles that cannot always be resolved by appealing to a common moral framework.

Normative moral assumptions relate to beliefs about what constitutes or what ought to constitute good, right, or virtuous actions and behaviors in society. These assumptions influence what moral content is taught and what virtues or principles are prioritized. A key question in moral education, particularly in pluralist contexts, is what should be taught given the acceptance of pluralism and the rejection of moral monism (the belief in a single, absolute moral truth). Burtonwood (2006) argues that moral education in pluralist societies should focus on teaching universal values while also recognizing the legitimacy of a plurality of moral perspectives.

Berlin's pluralism complements this view by positing that there are some universal values that all human beings, regardless of their culture or personal beliefs, can aspire to, such as freedom, justice, and the pursuit of happiness. However, these universal values are not exclusive or exhaustive. There is also a broad spectrum of legitimate values that are deeply embedded in different cultures and personal identities. This means that moral education must balance the teaching of universal values with respect for the plurality of legitimate moral perspectives.

Educators, therefore, should foster an environment where students learn to engage with conflicting values without resorting to relativism or dogmatism. Moral education should aim to cultivate virtues such as empathy, fairness, and open-mindedness, encouraging students to understand different perspectives while also forming their own moral judgments.

### **Summary**

This conceptual framework integrates Sanger and Osguthorpe's (2005) framework with Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism to offer a pluralist approach to moral education. The framework emphasizes the need for education to prepare students for moral conflicts inherent in a pluralist society. Through an understanding of Berlin's incommensurability of values and the cultivation of tolerance, students can navigate these conflicts while respecting a plurality of legitimate values. In this context, the ultimate goal of moral education is not to eliminate moral differences, but rather to equip students with the skills to engage constructively with diverse moral perspectives.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology and Methods**

This chapter describes the study's methodology and methods. I start with a discussion of critical realism as my selected paradigm and how its underlying ontology and epistemology align with my personal beliefs on the nature of both policy and Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism. I then connect the underlying assumptions of critical realism in my decision to use qualitative document content analysis as the research method for the study. Lastly, I outline the research methods I used to undertake the study.

#### **Methodology**

##### **Philosophical Assumptions**

As a researcher, I approached this study through a post-positivist lens consistent with the critical realist tradition of Bhaskar (2008; Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2010), Maxwell (2012), and Sayer (2011). Bhaskar (2008), Maxwell (2012), and Sayer (2011) argued that critical realism is distinguishable from theories that conflate epistemology and ontology. For example, the interaction of an observer with a phenomenon being observed may epistemologically create a distinctive understanding of the phenomenon, but it does not ontologically change the nature of the phenomenon itself. They further argued that critical realism reflects a view that ontological and epistemological assertions are distinct from each other. I will elaborate on this later in this section. Maxwell (2012) claimed that critical realism combines ontological realism, epistemological constructivism, and judgmental rationality.

Epistemologically, Maxwell (2012) described critical realism as being grounded in the view that all of our knowledge is partial, incomplete, and fallible. He argued that our understanding of the world is constructed through our interactions with it. Therefore,

our epistemology is essentially interpretive as opposed to corresponding. Whereas corresponding knowledge is seen as an objective mirror viewed by an independent observer that corresponds accurately to an objective external reality, interpretive knowledge emphasizes that reality is always interpreted through cultural, social, and individual lenses, meaning that what we know is shaped by our perspectives and experiences. Maxwell argued that interpretive epistemology holds that a researcher cannot fully grasp the external world and can only construct an understanding through interaction and interpretation. Therefore, knowledge claims are not judged by how accurately they mirror reality but by how well they interpret or make sense of their experiences.

Bhaskar (2008) encourages researchers to go beyond inductive interpretation and use retrodiction, a form of inference that involves reasoning backwards from observed effects to hypothesize underlying causes and mechanisms. He also advocated for what he labelled emancipatory practices, using the knowledge of real structures and mechanisms to challenge oppressive or undesirable social systems. That level of application is beyond the scope of this study.

Ontologically, as described by Maxwell (2012), critical realists stratify reality into three levels: empirical, actual, and real. Empirical reality is the layer of reality that we can observe or experience directly. Actual reality consists of the events that happen whether or not they are observed. Real reality consists of the underlying structures or mechanisms that cause or generate events.

Critical realism aligns with my ontological view of the world, which holds that reality exists regardless of our awareness of it. Epistemologically, I believe that our

understanding of reality is based on both our grasp of our sensory experiences and our interpretation of the underlying structures and mechanisms that comprise reality.

### ***Rationale***

The chosen research design aligned with my ontological perspective and was consistent with critical realism's ontological realism and epistemological fallibilism. First, the research questions lent themselves to qualitative research methods for a variety of reasons. First, both questions involved examining the nature and scope of moral education. For the purposes of this study, the terms nature and scope refer to the definition of the basic characteristics and breadth of applicability of a moral education agenda in Alberta. Determining nature and scope was a descriptive and interpretive task that primarily required a qualitative examination of text with consideration given to context to help infer the meaning of Alberta policies.

My ontological view about the nature of policy aligns with the critical realist paradigm's stratified reality. I regard morality and moral education as real entities represented in the Alberta government's documented policy texts. The policy texts themselves were actual artifacts that existed in an objective reality. My reading of policy texts occurred at the *empirical* level, as it was my direct sensory experience of the world.

Epistemologically, when reading the policies, I engaged in an interpretive exercise to develop my personal understanding of them. In this case, they were physical or digital texts containing symbolic language that I could empirically view and interpret. My interpretation was limited by my senses and influenced by the knowledge and beliefs that I held during the interpretive process. As a result, it was not objectively real, but I viewed it as an epistemological limitation. I believe that the written policy texts were

symbolic descriptions of policy writers' true and objective intentions. Their intentions represented the true level of reality.

A parallel rationale can be provided for the elements of Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism. For example, ontologically, I believe that value pluralism objectively exists as a *real* feature of our world. Berlin's writings created a symbolic representation of his understanding of what he meant by value pluralism. His writings exist at the *actual* level of reality. My reading of Berlin's writings occurred at the *empirical* level.

Epistemologically, my understanding of Berlin's writings was constructed through my interaction and interpretation of his, and others', writings as influenced by my personal characteristics and experiences.

The critical realist paradigm informed the entire interpretive exercise of this study, including the selection of qualitative content analysis as the means of examining the Alberta policy documents. Qualitative document content analysis, which is described in detail in the methods section, includes a process that progresses from initial open coding of the policy texts and other supportive documents through to categorization of the codes and the abstraction of the themes. This process was selected as a means of developing an understanding of the actual and possibly the real levels of reality.

## **Methods**

Using qualitative content document analysis, I sought to address the first research question and identify the nature and scope of moral education in Alberta as evidenced by policy documents in the first phase of the study. Qualitative content document analysis is a systematic process for reviewing and evaluating the content and meaning (Bowen, 2009; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of publicly available documents,

including official legal statutes and regulations, programs of studies, curriculum guiding frameworks, and transcripts of legislative debates. I did not utilize interviews of individuals, but as a means of triangulating the data present in the official policies, I did access documents in the public domain, including the Alberta Hansard, which articulated the positions and opinions of various stakeholders who weighed in on policy debates related to elements of moral education in Alberta.

In the second phase of the study, I sought to address the second research question by examining how the *nature and scope of Alberta's moral education policies address the pluralistic nature of Alberta's society*. I compare the elements of the Alberta moral education agenda, as identified in the qualitative document content analysis phase of the study, in terms of their congruence with the pluralist nature of Alberta by comparing them to the key principles of Berlin's (1958/2008) value pluralism.

### ***Phase 1: Qualitative Document Content Analysis***

**Step 1: Identification & Contextualization of Data Sources.** I identified data sources for the study using the following process. First, I identified and collected the Alberta statutes and official policy documents (English only) from the Ministry of Education addressing education, current as of September 30, 2023 by accessing the official Alberta Education website and Alberta King's Printer.

The policy texts reviewed in this study existed within a hierarchy of provincial policies. The *Education Act*, as a provincial statute, is the overarching law that governs education in Alberta. The current *Education Act* (2023) was based largely on a previous version that the Progressive Conservative Party first passed in 2013 to replace the previous *School Act* (2019). However, the transitional nature of governmental politics led

to a situation in which the *Education Act* was not enacted until 2019 because of two consecutive elections in which there were changes in the governing party. This had implications for how some of the data were selected for analysis.

While the *Education Act* (2023) was used as the primary statutory data source for this study, its current form incorporated many changes that were made over the course of eleven years. I determined that expanding the data from a single point in time to a broader range of dates would potentially provide a fuller understanding of Alberta policies. I believed this to be especially relevant, as it would permit some analysis of the legislative debates to provide additional context to the policies under consideration as part of the legislative processes. As a result, I reviewed the legislative amendment records in the Canadian Legal Information Institute database (canlii.org) to identify the amendment history of the relevant statutes.

I determined September 1, 2013 to be an appropriate start date for the period in which to examine the statutes and policies for several reasons. First, it allowed for the inclusion of both the *School Act* and the *Education Act*, which overlapped as passed legislation, with the latter being passed in 2012 and coming into force in 2019. 2013 was also the year that the first new ministerial order in fifteen years was issued that addressed the goals for student learning. With the new Education Act passed and a Ministerial Order on Student Learning issued, the foundational policies governing education in Alberta for most of the recent decade were in place, which created a somewhat natural delineation between past and current policies.

Choosing the time period after September 1, 2013 allowed me to focus on mostly current policies and also allowed for the inclusion of three significant bills that made



substantive amendments to the *School Act* between 2013 and 2019: Bill 10 (2015), I (2017), and Bill 28 (2017), as well as Bill 8 (2019), which made further amendments to the *Education Act* (2019) upon bringing it into force. Additionally, the *Education Act* (2019) underwent further legislative changes, including Bill 85 (2021), the *Education Statutes (Students First) Amendment Act*, and Bill 15 (2022), the *Education (Reforming Teacher Profession Discipline) Act*, bringing the 2019 version to its current state.

The *Education Act* (2023) provided the statutory authority for the second tier of policies - the provision for the Minister of Education to issue orders pertaining to education in the province. It is under this authority that the Ministerial Order on Student Learning (Government of Alberta, 2024), outlining the goals and standards for education, was issued. These goals were aligned with the *Education Act* passed the previous year.

Additional regulations and other mandated policies of Alberta Education were also implemented by the governmental administration to support the implementation of the statutory directives. Most of these regulations and policies, as identified in the *Guide to Education* (Alberta Education, 2023), dealt with the administrative operations of schools; however, upon review of the policies in place, the *Human Sexuality Education Policy* (Alberta Education, 2023) and *Inclusion Policy* (Alberta Education, 2023) were identified to have potential moral education implications and were included in the analysis of this study.

At the next level of policy was the curriculum, or program of studies, as it was also labelled in Alberta. The Minister approved the study program as the primary means through which the goals and standards outlined in the Ministerial Order are to be attained. It outlined the scope and sequence of learning outcomes to be taught in Alberta schools.

The approval and implementation time frames for some of the educational policies and curriculum in Alberta from 2013–2024 created challenges in identifying a clear and coherent mandate for moral education. For example, there was an approved *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) but less than half of Alberta’s curricula had been updated to align with that framework at the time of this study. In Alberta, the curriculum was to be rewritten to align with the 2013 *Education Act* and Ministerial Order on Student Learning. However, following the aforementioned change in government, that process was halted with a new process being initiated in 2016. Another election and change in government occurred in 2019 just prior to the intended implementation of a revised curriculum. The new government formed a curriculum review panel and undertook a third rewrite process starting in late 2019. As of this study, the new curriculum had only been approved and implemented in the subject areas of English Language Arts and Literature, Mathematics, Science, and Physical Education and Wellness in kindergarten through grade 6. The curriculum for grades 7 through 12 had not been updated to align with the curriculum framework at the time of this study. As a result, during the period of this study, Alberta had a curriculum ranging from less than one year old to twenty-seven years old.

All mandated curriculum current at the time of this study, the required programs of study for a student from grade 1 through grade 12, were included as data sources for this study, although only the following were found to include elements relating to moral education: Career and Life Management (grade 11), English Language Arts and Literature (grades 1–6), English Language Arts (grades 7-12), Health and Life Skills

(grades 7–9), Mathematics (grades 1–12), Physical Education and Wellness (grades 1–6), Physical Education (grades 7-10), Science (grades 1–10), and Social Studies (grades 1–12).

Additionally, two policies within the scope of analysis changed, or were in the process of changing, during the undertaking of the analysis. The first of these changes was to the Ministerial Order (2024) outlining the goals for education. The Minister issued a new directive, replacing the previous 2020 order. As this order became the mandate for the education system upon its passage, the data were updated to reflect the change, and the analysis included the new policy.

A second change was initiated during the time of this study but not completed. The kindergarten through grade 6 social studies program was approved for piloting. Unlike the ministerial order, the updated social studies curriculum was not yet the mandated program of studies in Alberta. It was the plan for the government to continue to make revisions during the piloting of the revised curriculum and for it to become mandated for the 2025-26 school year. As a result, the current mandated social studies program was used for policy analysis in this study at all grade levels. This challenge highlighted the challenge of examining a constantly evolving phenomenon such as policy and the limitation of a single point in time analysis.

Following the identification of known policy documents, I conducted a search of Alberta Education's website to identify other publicly available documentation that may include elements relevant to moral education in Alberta. This search was undertaken using the keywords of *moral*, *character*, *citizenship*, *values*, *ethics*, *ethical*, *virtue(s)*, *goal(s)*, *aim(s)*, and *purpose(s)*. The only document that this search uncovered in addition

to those previously identified was an Alberta Education resource entitled *The Heart of the Matter: Character and Citizenship Education in Alberta* (Alberta Education, 2005a). This resource contained explicit information about character and citizenship education but provided no direction for Alberta educators. In my quest to determine the role of this document, I discovered that it is only available as a resource document on the Alberta Education website. This resource is not referred to in any required Alberta policy, and a field services manager from Alberta Education confirmed that it was an old resource that remains available as a possible support in relation to creating a welcoming, safe, and caring school environment, but that it is not meant to provide specific direction and is in no way required of Alberta schools and teachers. As such, I deemed this resource to be extraneous to Alberta's moral education mandate and excluded from the analysis in this study.

As a means of data triangulation, I analyzed the Alberta Legislative Assembly Hansard transcripts for the debates relating to the statutory amendments between 2013 and 2024 to possibly provide a better understanding of the intent of the statutes as they were presented, refined, and approved. These included:

1. Bill 3 (2013) *Education Act*
2. Bill 10 (2015) An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect our Children
3. Bill 24 (2017) An Act to Support Gay-Straight Alliances
4. Bill 28 (2017) School Amendment Act
5. Bill 8 (2019) Education Amendment Act
6. Bill 85 (2021) Education Statutes (Students First) Amendment Act

## 7. Bill 15 (2022) Education (Reforming Teacher Profession Discipline) Act

The 2013 Bill 3 Hansard was included because, although the 2013 *Education Act* was never enacted, it formed the basis for the 2019 *Education Act*, and, as such, legislative debate surrounding the antecedent version was deemed to potentially contain data germane to the current statute.

I then searched the Alberta Hansard using the same keywords listed previously to identify other official debates that may have contained moral education elements. This search failed to turn up any additional data beyond what was identified in the specific policy search.

During the coding process, I identified additional documents referred to within existing data sources and reviewed them as additional data sources. These included the *Alberta Human Rights Act (2023)*, *Teacher Quality Standard* (Government of Alberta, 2023a), *Leadership Quality Standard* (Government of Alberta, 2023b), *Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard* (Government of Alberta, 2023c), Curriculum Advisory Panel's (2019): *Recommendations for Directions for Curriculum report*.

Even though I understood prior to undertaking this investigation that Alberta had no explicit moral education policies in place, the lack of such amplified the difficulty in defining the nature and scope of moral education, highlighting the interpretive nature of this exercise.

The first phase of this study, for which the findings will be presented in chapter 4, consisted of a qualitative document content analysis of the moral education agenda in Alberta using a process of qualitative document content analysis that focused on interpreting the content or contextual meaning of the text. Hsieh and Shannon (2005)

defined qualitative content analysis as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns (p. 1278). Qualitative content analysis can be classified as conventional or directed. Directed qualitative content analysis starts with a structured process based on an existing theory or prior research findings that guide the analysis. In this study, the first research question aimed to identify the nature and scope of moral education given the absence of explicit policies. As such, the analysis of the data sought to avoid preconceptions about what that nature and scope may be, and a conventional content analysis was utilized.

Conventional content analysis is a primarily inductive process (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) in which researchers avoid using preconceived categories (Kondracki et al., 2002). This method involves the examination of text leading to the identification of the categories with the goal of describing a phenomenon, developing concept(s), or building a model (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) such as, in this case, a model reflecting the scope and nature of moral education policies in Alberta. Conventional content analysis includes four steps: 1) Making sense of the whole, 2) open coding, 3) grouping and categorization, and 4) abstraction (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

**Step 2: Making sense of the whole.** Once the data sources were identified, the analysis began with multiple readings of the documents in their entirety to gain what Hsieh and Shannon called *a sense of the whole* prior to initiating the coding process. This included seeking to understand the scope of the data and identify any overall impressions of the data. At this point, I noted that I felt I had very little sense of any strong overall themes or other substantive impressions of what the data had to say about moral

education. In fact, I noted with concern that there appeared to be few data addressing moral education. Following the readings of the whole texts, I did, however, have a better structural sense of the data in terms of the relationships of different levels of policies and their focus or contents. I was beginning to see what elements of which policies may have held some relevance to moral education and how the different policies related to one another. With at least somewhat of a sense of the whole gained, I moved on to the second step of the conventional content analysis, open coding.

**Step 3: Open coding.** This study utilized a coding process that Elo and Kyngäs (2008) referred to as open coding, grouping and categorization, and abstraction. During this process, I used intermittent memoing to mitigate the potential effects of unacknowledged preconceptions and reduce the impact of researcher bias. Memoing consisted of engaging in periodic reflection on my cognitive processes during the coding process. This included theoretical reflections about the cognitive process of conducting research, methodological reflections about the procedural aspects of research, and other observational reflections about the research endeavor (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Data were coded using the NVivo software. I chose NVivo for several reasons. First, it provided a highly efficient means of managing the data, acting as a single repository for the significant number and different types of texts utilized as data. Second, it provided an efficient means of assigning codes to the data. While the NVivo software supports automatic coding, that feature was not utilized and only manual coding was done as NVivo's own online product support documentation stated that automatic coding provides "quick results but the results could be less accurate. If accuracy is paramount, you should code manually" (QSR International, n.d.). The third reason for utilizing

NVivo is that it provided search and query functions, which enabled me to explore the data for various content, improving the effectiveness and efficiency of the coding process. This was not done proactively but was done as a process of double-checking that relevant text was not missed for coding. This occurred more frequently during the earlier part of the coding process when new codes were being created and less frequently as the scope of codes became more robust.

The initial phase of the coding process consisted of an initial reading of the text and the identification of annotations or codes that described aspects of the data content. Because this phase of the study was inductive, no headings were determined prior to the open coding process. Once codes were used, it was difficult to avoid deductively examining subsequent data for elements associated with those codes. To attempt to mitigate this tendency, as I was unable to avoid thinking of existing codes while examining the data, I attempted to re-examine any excerpt of data coded to a pre-existing code and added additional annotations or codes that described that passage of text if deemed applicable. This led to multiple codes for many elements of the data but worked to maximize the breadth of open coding in an attempt to reduce the impact of preconceived bias.

**Step 4: Grouping and categorization.** Following the completion of open coding, the identified headings were then grouped, collapsing those that were similar or dissimilar into categories. At this point, I used two additional strategies to further explore the data. First, I used a word frequency search of the data in NVivo to identify other potentially applicable codes. Second, as categories began to emerge, text searches of the



data were undertaken to explore for additional relevant passages in the data that may have gone previously unidentified.

In this phase of the data analysis, I noted that there were multiple ways of identifying commonalities among codes and categorizing the data. I determined that I could either try to maintain clear distinctions between categories or allow overlaps within them. I chose to do the latter, recognizing that to do otherwise would have been to lay a predetermined structure over the policy data being examined that may not best represent the data. In this regard, I believed that fidelity to the data needed to be maintained.

**Step 5: Abstraction of themes.** The final phase of the qualitative document content analysis involved naming and grouping categories under main categories to create the thematic structure. This process resulted in the key pillars or themes and subthemes, which were determined to comprise a general description or model of moral education in Alberta.

### ***Phase 2: Berlinian Analysis***

In this second phase of the study, the results of the qualitative document content analysis of the provincial policies will be examined through the key elements of Berlin's (1958/2008) conceptualization of value pluralism and described in the conceptual framework for pluralist moral education described in Chapter 2. This deductive process included analyzing how Alberta policies addressed Berlin's (1958/2008, 1988/1990) views that the incommensurability and incompatibility of human values are unavoidable, pluralism is preferable to monism, and a minimum degree of negative liberty is essential to human experience. The resultant assessment of congruence between Alberta's moral education agenda with that which would be advocated by Berlin was then utilized to

develop suggestions for how the Alberta government might better address the disparate elements of a heterogeneous population.

### *Trustworthiness*

Sayer (2011) indicated that critical realist researchers need to address the problem of determining how we justify knowledge claims and explain what it is about reality that leads us to form the kind of knowledge we claim to have. Because this was a qualitative investigation, the traditional quantitative issues of validity and reliability do not readily apply. In seeking to establish a qualitative equivalent of validity and reliability, I enlisted Guba and Lincoln's (1994) conceptualization of trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln identified four key elements of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, which I address in the context of the current study's methodology.

This study's credibility was bolstered by a couple of important methodological decisions. The sources of data used for this inquiry were all public documents, and, whenever possible, the official policies were triangulated with official debates of the policymakers. The study's dependability was bolstered by the use of a conventional approach to qualitative content document analysis as a means of minimizing researcher bias and preconceptions about the data. It was further supported by the use of memoing during the research process to help maintain awareness of my biases and assumptions when making decisions as part of the open coding, grouping, and categorization steps of the coding process. For example, while the grouping of codes was a fluid process of grouping and regrouping codes until an overall structure resulted which fit the data, I noted in my reflections that the early decisions I made about the grouping of codes impacted the range of subsequent grouping decisions available. In response to this, I

made a change to my grouping process by individually assigning codes to multiple groups in which they appeared to fit. I maintained the duplicate groupings until all the data was grouped and then made decisions about where a code was best fit and eliminated the duplicates from other groups. This refined grouping process led to changes to where some codes were grouped and increased my confidence that I reduced potential bias as much as possible in such a subjective exercise.

Furthermore, the qualitative document content analysis made extensive use of quotations extracted from the data to support the observations. This allows the reader to see how I made the connections between the data and the results. Although my identification and selection of excerpts remained subjective, the presentation of the data allows external readers to understand the rationale for my analysis, supporting the study's confirmability. Transferability of research is ultimately up to the reader's determination of its applicability in other contexts (Polit & Beck, 2010). The use of Berlin's (1958/2008) value pluralism as an analytic framework was viewed as a process that may transfer across contexts, and the analysis and discussion attempted to make connections to practice that may allow for transferability. While this study constituted a singular interpretation, by considering the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the research process, I attempted to improve its trustworthiness.

### **Delimitations**

The first delimitation of this study was a contextual one. In this study, I limited my investigation of moral education policies to Alberta.

Second, only official data sources in the public domain were examined. As a result, the derived conceptualization of moral education in Alberta from these data

sources is theoretical in nature and does not reflect how moral education is being interpreted or implemented within schools.

A third delimitation was the study's emphasis on Alberta's explicit educational policies of the current curricula (that which is explicitly identified to be taught) and null curricula (that which is not taught). This was not intended to diminish the potential role of implicit curricula in contributing to students' moral formation. For example, Thornberg (2009) found that school structures and rules have embedded outcomes strongly connected to citizenship education. Eisner (2002) indicated, in some cases, the implicit socialization of students can be "more powerful and longer lasting than what is intentionally taught" (p. 88). An examination of implicit curricula, learning in the school that is largely unintentional, was beyond the initial scope of this study; however, as is discussed in chapter 4, some of Alberta's proposed and implemented policies that were analyzed specifically addressed areas which may implicitly impact students' moral development. As a result, they were included in the study because they were explicit policies. It is worth noting that some of what explicit moral education attempts to do is make the implicit explicit (Lockwood, 2009).

The nature of policy and the scope of this study form a fourth delimitation. While this delimitation will be elaborated on in the methodology section, in brief, this study conceptualized policy in line with Dye (2017), as authoritative decisions written in official texts that outlined the government's intention. As there were no explicit policies addressing moral education, I used a rationalist approach to the analysis, specifically qualitative content document analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008; Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), in an attempt to make the invisible visible. Rizvi and Lingard (2010) summarize some of the

critiques and limitations of the rationalist approach, including the view that policy is inherently political and value-infused and that a rationalist approach ignores the processes of enactment, interpretation, and translation by those charged with putting policy into practice. I agree with the limitations Rizvi and Lingard ascribed to the rationalist approach, but given that one focus of this study was to uncover possible policy intentions in the absence of an explicit written policy for moral education, I deemed these limitations to be acceptable.

### **Limitations**

There were two significant limitations in this study. The qualitative nature of this study dictated that data was interpreted by myself as a researcher. Although methodological processes, including bracketing, were used to attempt to minimize researcher bias and maximize trustworthiness of the analysis (as is further addressed in chapter 3), the research process required subjective decisions to be made throughout. As such, the results must be viewed as *an* interpretation of the data, not *the* interpretation of the data.

Another limitation is that the interpretation of the Berlinian principles used in the second part of the analysis is also the researcher's. As discussed in chapter 2, there have been multiple interpretations and critiques of Berlin's work, and the analysis reflected my determination of a valid set of principles arising from the review of literature. Once again, this subjectivity means that the results of the analysis must be viewed as one interpretation of the data, not the only interpretation of the data

**Summary**

This chapter summarized the methodology and methods for the study. It identified the underlying philosophical assumptions and rationale for the chosen qualitative approach to the research questions. I then described the processes of data identification, qualitative document content analysis, and Berlinian analysis that comprised this study. Last, I discussed how credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were considered in the study to support its trustworthiness.

## Chapter 4: Findings

In this section, I identify the themes and subthemes related to moral education that emerged in the analysis of Alberta's education policies and legislative debates related to such policies. Extensive excerpts from the data are provided to illustrate the presence of these themes and their related subthemes in the analyzed data.

### Themes and Subthemes

In analyzing the data, three themes emerged: 1) the individual as a moral agent, 2) the nature of the good society, 3) the school as a nexus of common and uncommon values. The *individual as moral agent* describes how the nature of an ethical individual in relation to themselves and others was represented in Alberta policies, and contains subthemes of: the primacy of the individual, the individual as an ethical decision-maker, the individual as virtuous in relation to self and others, and the individual as caring. The *nature of a good society* identifies the desirable characteristics of society as described within Alberta policies and includes the subthemes of: being democratic, embracing pluralism, having common values, and being civil. The *school as a nexus of common and uncommon values* describes how Alberta policies defined systems, processes, and structures to respond to the convergence of common and uncommon values present in society. It encompasses the subthemes of supporting common values and addressing uncommon values.

#### ***Theme One: Individual as a Moral Agent***

The first theme, the individual's importance as an ethical moral agent, arose quite consistently in the data. This does not mean that morality was described as residing solely within the confines of individuals; rather, it highlights the important role that the

individual is viewed to play in society as described in Alberta policies. Within this theme, there are four key subthemes that outline how the nature of the individual as a moral agent is reflected in Alberta policies: the primacy of the individual, the individual as an ethical decision-maker, the individual as virtuous in relation to self and others, and the individual as caring. Although these themes and their component subthemes are presented separately, there was much overlap amongst them within the data. Taken together, these subthemes provide a holistic view of the individual as an ethical moral agent.

**Subtheme: Primacy of the Individual.** The primacy of the individual was identified in many levels of Alberta policies, including the *Education Act*. The *Education Act* (2023) preamble did contextualize the role of education as the “foundation of a democratic and civil society” but that was the only goal statement in the Act that specifically addresses community or societal goals for education. In contrast to that, the Act described the paramountcy of the individual in stating:

the role of education is to develop engaged thinkers who think critically and creatively and ethical citizens who demonstrate respect, teamwork, and democratic ideals and who work with an entrepreneurial spirit to face challenges with resiliency, adaptability, risk-taking, and bold decision-making. (*Education Act*, 2023, p. 13)

The *Education Act* further describes the goals of education in terms of individual fulfillment and success, as evidenced by multiple additional statements within the preamble. Education was described as a means to “inspire students to discover and pursue their aspirations and interests,” nurture a “positive sense of self,” “achieve their



potential,” “achieve success” and “maximize success” (*Education Act*, 2023, p. 13-14). This is not to say that the *Education Act* focused exclusively on individual success and fulfillment, but rather that it primarily defined outcomes in terms of the individual. For example, even when identifying a commitment to providing an inclusive system, the goal of inclusion is identified not in terms of community outcomes, but as a means of providing “each student with the relevant learning opportunities and supports necessary to achieve success” (*Education Act*, 2023, p.13).

The primary goal of education in Alberta was framed slightly differently in the Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2020), although the emphasis on the student remained the primary focus of education. The vision for student learning began with the statement “Students will gain the skills, knowledge, and competencies they need to live fulfilling lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (p. 1). The Order also listed communication, critical thinking, knowledge development, health, character development, preparation for the future, community and civic engagement, as well as Alberta, Canada, and the World as nine priority outcome areas for the education system. Each of the outcomes center the individual learner at the focus, as all of the specific outcomes identified are written in the form of “students will...”. For example, in the area of communication, the outcome stated that “students will learn how to structure their communication provide evidence, and communicate in a precise manner” (p. 2). In the area of character development, the outcome stated that “students develop honesty, integrity, and self-reliance through the application of their knowledge and skills...students will demonstrate a commitment to the common good by exercising compassion, empathy, and support for one another...” (p. 4). The structure of these

written outcomes demonstrates that, as articulated in Alberta policies, the purpose of education is to develop the individual student. Even when a broader community impact is identified, such as the *common good* in the character education outcome quoted above, the individual is viewed in terms of individual attitudes and actions.

The framing of educational purposes around the individual was also present at other policy levels. The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) identified eight student competencies, which were described as “combinations of knowledge, skills, and characteristics that students develop and apply for successful learning, living, and working” (p. 22). Similar to the outcome structure in the Ministerial Order, each of these forty-two competencies listed outcomes written in a manner that focused on what the individual is expected to demonstrate. For example, the collaboration competency indicated that the “student demonstrates collaboration by...valuing flexibility, compromise, and the contributions of others to nurture positive working relationships” (p. 24). Another example was under the citizenship competency, which indicated that the “student demonstrates citizenship by...evaluating the moral and ethical impact of decisions or actions on individuals and communities” (p. 24). These two examples highlight that even when curricular outcomes included a focus on external elements such as contributions of others, positive working relationships, or communities, they were still framed as attitudes or actions of individuals.

In summary, Alberta policies focused on individuals as ends in themselves, but also, although never explicitly stated, appear to reflect a belief that the means to achieving a good society, described as democratic and civil, is by developing individuals

who will comprise that society. The following section summarizes what I identified as the next subtheme of moral agency of the individual; the view that having an orientation towards personal success is virtuous.

**Subtheme: Success-orientation as Virtuous.** Alberta policies did not put forth a comprehensive articulation of a virtuous individual but repeatedly included elements that emphasized the success of the individual. Consistent with the emphasis on the individual as the primary ethical agent previously described, this subtheme reflected a strong emphasis on the individual's self-interest. This emphasis was present in multiple levels of policies and was typically addressed in terms of performance, growth, and the characteristics of individuals that would lead them to achieve success.

As previously stated, the *Education Act* (2023) identified individual success multiple times in describing the goals of education. The need for a highly collaborative and inclusive education system in which high quality, engaging, and flexible learning opportunities are offered was justified by their means to help students “achieve their potential,” “achieve success” or “maximize success” (*Education Act*, 2023, p. 13-14). The Ministerial Order (2024), also mentioned prior, provided further elaboration on what the Ministry viewed as success: excellence and fulfillment. The opening statement of the Ministerial Order indicated, among other things, that Education in Alberta will promote “...personal responsibility and excellence, and respect for difference and inherent dignity of each individual” (p. 1). It further described within the vision for student learning that “students will gain the skills, knowledge, and competencies they need to live fulfilling lives and make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (p. 1) and

stated that all students “need to be successful, fulfilled, and fully participative in building this province” (p. 8).

The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) also emphasized excellence and fulfillment as being key elements of successful students. The framework’s mandate was described as setting “clear direction for developmentally appropriate curriculum of high academic standards for personal excellence” (p. 5). It also included statements describing success, such as “students will strive for and attain personal excellence” (p. 5) and “every Alberta student will have the opportunity to... lead a meaningful, fulfilling life and to succeed in a changing economy” (p. 5).

Throughout the policies, a number of attributes or characteristics were identified that provided further clarification of what qualified as a successful individual. These were often attributes that Lickona (2004) termed performance virtues, or virtues that assist someone in realizing their potential for success. I will not provide an exhaustive list of all virtues that may have appeared in isolation in the data. Rather, I will identify a number of virtues that were present with sufficient prominence or frequency to be considered substantive, and then I will expand on the two groups of performance virtues that were most strongly present in the data.

In Alberta policies, successful students were described in multiple places as having many performance virtues, including being competitive, creative, independent, risk-taking, self-disciplined, goal-oriented, and perseverant. Of these, the last two, goal-orientedness and perseverance, had dominant profiles in the data, showing up noticeably more than the others. Goal-orientedness encompassed a group of codes related to the

identification, pursuit, and accomplishment of goals. These included references to fulfillment, well-being, motivation, and excellence. Perseverance included references to similar virtues such as diligence, tenacity, and resilience. These performance virtues were present in the Ministerial Order's (Government of Alberta, 2024) description of the successful student, as well as in other additional levels of policies.

Successful individuals were defined in the *Education Act* (2023) as students who “pursue their aspirations and interests” (p. 13) and “achieve their potential” (p. 13), which reflected the goal-orientedness as a virtue for students. The Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2024) added a number of additional descriptions of success-orientation as desirable or virtuous in students. These included stating that students will “...develop their unique talents and potential, providing a sense of purpose and belonging” (p. 1), “prepare for fulfilling careers” (p. 1), cultivate “...personal growth and well-being” (p. 1), and “live fulfilling lives” (p. 1). The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) stated that students will “set learning, career or wellness goals and work towards them” (p. 24) and “explore, select, or adapt strategies and resources that support personal growth in character, academics or career pathways” (p. 24), and the kindergarten through grade 6 competency progressions (Alberta Education, 2024a) identified “seeking out experiences that make me happy” (p. 2), “setting goals to address my wants or needs” (p. 2), “developing and applying strategies to accomplish personal goals” (p. 3) as a progression focusing on goal-setting, further highlighting the importance that Alberta policies place on individuals developing and having a success-orientation.

The health program of studies for grades 7 through 11 identified “planning and setting goals” as a key learning goal (Alberta Education, (2002b, p. 1). In addition, seeking personal challenge and setting “goals that will continue to provide personal challenges” (Alberta Education, 2000b, p. 33) was also a defined outcome of the physical education program of studies.

Perseverance was a second performance virtue identified commonly throughout Alberta policies, which was seen as an important attribute that supports the attainment of goals to which an individual may be oriented. The Ministerial Order described the successful student as one who “demonstrated resilience and good judgment in a rapidly change world” (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 4). The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) identified perseverance as a key means to achieving success, indicating that students were to “build resilience, and adapt to change” (p. 14), “demonstrate...perseverance with transforming ideas into actions” (p. 23), and “demonstrating...resilience when adapting to new situations and transitions” (p. 24). The competency progressions (Alberta Education, 2024a) identified students “working towards achieving goals even when there are challenges” (p. 1) and “understanding that new challenges can help me develop resilience” (p. 1) as indicators of desirable student progress as well.

A number of specific programs of study also identified perseverance as a virtue to be developed. The recently implemented kindergarten through grade 6 physical education and wellness curriculum placed particular emphasis on the development of perseverance, with twenty-three mentions of perseverance or resilience among the program outcomes

(Alberta Education, 2022c). The grades 7 through 10 physical education program of studies included outcomes across a number of grade levels that encourage the creation of personal strategies to overcome barriers (Alberta Education, 2002b). The high school math program identified “persevering in mathematical problem solving” (Alberta Education, 2008, p. 2) as a desired outcome.

In summary, Alberta policies reflected the view that the virtuous individual is one who aspires to be successful by attaining success and fulfillment. In particular, being goal-oriented and perseverant were identified throughout policies as performance virtues that enable individuals to achieve success, thereby meeting the vision of a virtuous individual, at least in part, as outlined in Alberta policies. A focus on one’s own success, even though identified as a significant component of the good Albertan, was not complete. A focus on others' success and well-being was also identified as a subtheme that pervaded Alberta policies. This is discussed next.

**Subtheme: Other-orientation as Virtuous.** The *Education Act* (2023) identified in its vision for student learning that “students will...make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (p. 1). It also identified the development of ethical citizens as one of the key components of the role of education, and further described an ethical citizen as one who “who demonstrates respect, teamwork and democratic ideals” (p.13). The very use of the term citizen indicated the importance of the individual’s role in something bigger than themselves. Additionally, all three behaviors indicate something beyond the individual's self-interest. Elaboration of the view of the virtuous individual as someone who focuses on the well-being of others beyond themselves was found in the Ministerial Order. The Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2024) outlined several

outcomes for Alberta students, including that students will: “make meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (p. 1), “need to be successful, fulfilled, and fully participative in building this province” (p. 3), “demonstrate a commitment to the common good by exercising compassion, empathy, and support for one another in their diverse society” (p. 4), “recognize...our shared history and traditions, as well as the social and organizational skills required for civic participation” (p. 5), and “recognize their shared responsibility for environmental stewardship and sustainability” (p. 6). These outcomes described a range of desirable foci for a virtuous individual, from supporting one another to stewardship for the environment, but all reflected, as a good, a focus beyond one’s self-interest. As well as being prominent in the highest levels of policies, the virtuousness of having an orientation toward the well-being of others was the most prevalent subtheme throughout the data analyzed, being manifested in policies in a number of different ways. For example, in the Ministerial Order, it was articulated in terms of community orientation. In other instances, it was identified as a local, global orientation (Alberta Education, 2005b, 2007, 2014b) or an environmental orientation (Alberta Education, 2005b, 2014a, 2014b, 2023b). Elsewhere in the policies, the relationship with the other was described more generally as a focus on the common good or was more personal in nature, focusing on other individuals or groups. Given the outward focus of this theme, it is highly integrated with other themes, including the nature of the community’s needs or the nature of the good community. Although the actual relationship between the individual and the community may be interdependent, the presentation of my analysis’s descriptive findings is my attempt to articulate them discreetly. Hence, the description of the good society follows later as the second theme.



Presented here are excerpts from the data that illustrate the internal aspects of an individual in relation to others, including the broader society. The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) describes the role of the ethical individual as one who “demonstrates a commitment to the common good by exercising compassion, empathy, and support for one another” (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 3). The social studies program of studies (Alberta Education, 2007) articulated the importance of understanding that empowerment brings with it a “personal and collective responsibility for the public good” (p. 4) and to “arrive at decisions for the public good” (p. 5). In terms of specific learning outcomes, however, the social studies program of studies focused on developing the student’s understanding of the “dynamic between individualism and common good [and] . . . appreciation of the various perspectives” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 20) of that relationship, highlighting a possible tension that I address later regarding the third theme.

A focus on local and global communities appeared in a broad range of Alberta curricula. The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) restated three times the desire to develop students who made “meaningful contributions to their communities and the world” (p. 16, 22, & 24). The health 7 to 11 program of studies included students’ exploration of how “individual contributions can have a positive influence upon the family, school and community” (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 3). The mathematics 7 to 12 program of studies included “preparing students to make informed decisions as contributors to society” (Alberta Education, 2008, p. 2). The social studies curriculum described its role as including the development of students’ “awareness of their capacity

to effect change in their communities, society and the world” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 1). The social studies curriculum also included several specific learning outcomes related to community contribution. Starting in grade 1, students were to “participate in projects that improve or meet the needs of their community” (Alberta Education, 2005b, Grade 1, p. 2). Commencing in grade 4, students are to “demonstrate commitment to the well-being of the community by drawing attention to situations of injustice where action is needed” (Alberta Education, 2005b, Grade 4, p. 2). In high school, students are to “demonstrate a global consciousness with respect to the human condition and global affairs” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 23).

An outward focus on the environment was also prevalent throughout Alberta policies. This was often described as environmental stewardship, such as in the *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* goal for students to “recognize a shared responsibility for environmental stewardship and sustainability” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 24). The new science kindergarten through grade 6 curriculum included an outcome for “students to develop a deeper understanding of the natural world, consider the impact of their actions, and recognize the responsibility we share for environmental stewardship and sustainability (Alberta Education, 2022c, p. 1) The grade 7 through 12 science program of studies (Alberta Education, 2014a, 2014b) included stewardship as a core attitude outcome at all secondary grade levels, describing it as “demonstrating sensitivity and responsibility in pursuing a balance between the needs of humans and a sustainable environment” (2014b, p. 70).

The examples provided to illustrate the other-orientation subtheme so far reflect a somewhat conceptual level of caring for or contributing to something or someone beyond

oneself, but Alberta policies did include descriptions of an ethical citizen's focus on others in more personal contexts. The Ministerial Order included the statement that education promotes "respect for difference and the inherent dignity of each individual" (Government of Alberta, 2023, p. 1) as part of its definition of the ethical citizen. The health study program was the most significant policy elaborating on this ideal. The health curriculum for grades 7 through 9 identified positive relationship choices as one of its three core outcomes, and it had specific learning outcomes at every grade level directed at this general outcome. These were defined as "demonstrating responsibility, respect and caring in order to establish and maintain healthy interactions" (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 3). The health program of studies was not alone in identifying responsibility, respect, and caring as the key criteria for determining the merit of one's behaviour in interpersonal interactions. Developing an ethic of care toward self, others and the natural world was also identified in the social studies curriculum front matter as being central to active and "responsible citizenship and identity within local, national, and global communities" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 8). However, the most prevalent parameters identified in Alberta policies for developing and maintaining positive interactions with others were respect and responsibility, although it should be noted that a definition of either term could not be found anywhere in Alberta policies.

Respect was the most frequently identified characteristic in all of the policies reviewed. In addition to the aforementioned references, the *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* described the importance that respect plays in addressing pluralism within Alberta in stating:

A peaceful, pluralistic society and an energized civilization require respect and mutual understanding among people of different faiths, experiences, and backgrounds. The curriculum will provide coherent foundational learning to help students develop a respectful understanding of the contributions of the many linguistic, cultural, and ethnic groups in Canada. (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 18)

Alberta Education's (2024b) competency progressions for kindergarten through grade 6 included outcomes in which students would "respect social or cultural practices in formal and informal situations when communicating with others" (p. 1) and "demonstrate sensitivity and respect for diversity when working with others to achieve a common goal" (p. 2).

The social studies curriculum (Alberta Education, 2007) approached respect at a somewhat abstract level by identifying respect for the "dignity of all human beings" (p. 3) as important, whereas it identified respect for "the positions of others" (p. 6) as a more personal and concrete application. The junior high science program of studies identified mutual respect as a foundational attitude, and encouraged students to develop scientific understanding by respecting the ideas of others with "different views and backgrounds" (Alberta Education, 2014b, p. 5). In contrast, respect for others was described in a more personal manner in both the health and physical education curricula. The kindergarten through grade 6 physical education and wellness curriculum contained sixteen references to respect, including a number of specific references to the importance of consent in respecting the boundaries of others: "In wellness education, students learn about the importance of consent, mutual respect, dignity, and responsibility" (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 1). These included developing students understanding that "Consent is critical to

respecting the rights, feelings, and belongings of others” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 27.) The physical education program of studies across all grades from 7 through grade 10 included the development and demonstration of respectful communication skills and the demonstration of positive behaviours that show respect for others (Alberta Education, 2000b). Starting in grade 7, “communicating thoughts and feelings in an appropriate respectful manner” became an additional outcome (Alberta Education, 2000b, p. 24). The grade 7 through 10 health program curriculum, as mentioned previously, identified the demonstration of respect for others throughout the grades, including specific behaviours that are presented in terms of showing respect: showing interest in the feelings of others, encouraging others, and being willing to accept others’ disagreements of opinion from one’s own (Alberta Education, 2002b). These examples were the closest thing to a definition of respect articulated in the data.

Responsibility to others was the other prevalent characteristic in Alberta policies relating to caring for others. Similar to respect, responsibility towards others was identified in multiple curricula across most grade levels. The kindergarten through grade 6 physical education and wellness curriculum (Alberta Education, 2022) included a number of outcomes specific to responsibility. In particular, many focused on the importance of responsibility in ensuring the safety and well-being of others, such as “responsibility includes making decisions to ensure self or others are not in unsafe and uncomfortable situations” (p. 27) as well as “Responsibility is being accountable for actions and decisions and accepting the results or consequences. Responsibility includes clearly requesting, obtaining, giving, or refusing consent. Responsibility includes respecting the acceptance or refusal of consent from another” (p. 45). Numerous

outcomes in the health curriculum related to students understanding the importance of taking responsibility for their behavior and choices. Many of these related to personal wellness choices, but others related to the general outcome of “making responsible and informed choices to . . . promote safety for self and others” (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 6), “demonstrating awareness of the ways in which people take care of responsibilities in the home and school” (p. 25), “examining the responsibilities associated with a variety of roles including family member or friend” (p. 25), and “identifying responsibilities involved with involvement in a sexual relationship” (p. 12). The physical education curriculum across grades 1 to 6 required students to “demonstrate responsibility for various roles” (Alberta Education, 2000b, p. 23) in activities with others. The elementary science curriculum identified the acquisition and application of “a sense of responsibility for personal and group actions” (Alberta Education, 1996, p. B.2) at all grade levels commencing in grade 1. The social studies curriculum indicated students are to develop a “sense of personal and collective responsibility” and be prepared to “participate responsibly in society” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 8). In addition, the high school program of studies described responsibilities more abstractly than the other curricula, but in a manner that still illustrated a personal onus towards the well-being of others. Learner outcomes identified that students were to “accept political, social and environmental responsibilities associated with global citizenship [and] . . . accept responsibilities associated with individual and collective citizenship” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 6).

In summary, Alberta policies reflected the view that virtuous individuals are those who are focused on more than just their own self-interest. They are concerned with others' well-being. This focus on others was identified to occur on personal, community,

societal, and global levels. Respect and responsibility were among the key characteristics of the virtuous, other-focused individuals.

**Subtheme: Ethical Decision-Maker.** The final subtheme identified in Alberta policies relating to the theme of the individual as a moral agent is the role of the individual as an ethical decision-maker. This subtheme was the least explicitly articulated of the four comprising the theme of moral agency, but a number of elements related to individual decision-making were quite evident in the data, as I illustrate in this section. I determined that the connection to an ethical dimension was sufficiently present in policies to allow its inclusion.

Ethical decision-making does not explicitly appear in Alberta education policies. In a number of Alberta policies, however, good decision-making is identified as an outcome for students. This is not to say that ethical decisions and good decisions are equivalent, but in analyzing the policies, connections between the two were identified. Before discussing those connections, I first identify what Alberta policies described as good decision-making. Decision-making appeared as an element of a number of provincial curricula, but the grade 7 through 11 health curriculum identifies, as its aim, the enabling “of students to make well-informed, healthy choices . . . that contribute to the well-being of self and others” (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 1). The entire health program of studies was focused on the general outcomes of wellness, relationship choices, and life learning choices in grades 1 through 9, with the addition of resource choices in the high school Career and Life Management course (Alberta Education, 2002a). The health curriculum included a number of specific outcomes for students including the “identification of steps of a decision-making process” (Alberta Education,

2002a, p. 22), “demonstration of effective decision making, focusing on careful information gathering,” and “investigating the effectiveness of various decision-making strategies” (Alberta Education, 2002a, p. 23). These outcomes highlighted the reasoned or rational nature of good decision-making identified in this Alberta policy as well as other policy documents. The social studies curriculum also described good decision-making as primarily a rational exercise in its goal of seeking:

to develop students’ ability to make timely and appropriate decisions by identifying the need for a decision, then weighing the advantages, disadvantages, and consequences of various alternatives. Decision-making involves reserving judgments until all the options and perspectives have been explored; seeking clarity for a variety of choices and perspectives; examining the cause-and-effect relationship between choices; and basing decisions on knowledge, values, and beliefs. (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 9)

The emphasis on reasoning is apparent in higher-level policies as well. The Ministerial Order stated that “Critical thinking enables students to understand complex problems, develop creative solutions, gather and assess information objectively, and make reasoned decisions” (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 2). The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) identified critical thinking as a desirable competency of Alberta students and defined it as:

involving reasoning logically to analyze and synthesize new knowledge with existing knowledge in a coherent way. Students reflect on their thinking to improve it. They reason from sound premises. They evaluate arguments and avoid



contradictions. They know how to identify and avoid logical fallacies. Critical thinkers can discern the difference between fact and opinion and can back up their opinions with evidence. Students demonstrate the humility to be open to critique, value honesty, and have the courage to question assumptions with demonstrable facts and reason. (p. 22)

The social studies curriculum specifically included an ethical component in its identification of critical thinking as a goal, describing it as

a process of inquiry, analysis and evaluation resulting in a reasoned judgment . . . that includes the skills of distinguishing fact from opinion; considering the reliability and accuracy of information; determining diverse points of view, perspective and bias; and considering the ethics of decisions and actions. (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 8)

Alberta's policies' emphasis on the good decision-maker as rational did not exclude all values from consideration in the process of making decisions. As shown previously, the social studies curriculum, in addition to knowledge, included values and beliefs as a basis for decisions. The health 7 to 11 program of studies (Alberta Education, 2002b) also included a number of outcomes that identified the consideration of values as a desirable aspect of good decision-making. For example, students were to "give attention to the values that underlie individual choice and personal responsibility for the consequences of behaviours in the decision-making process" (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 5) and "identify and communicate values and beliefs that affect healthy choices" (p. 10). At the high school level, in respect to financial and other resources, students were to "make responsible decisions that reflect personal values and goals and demonstrate

commitment to self and others” (Alberta Education, 2002a, p. 4). In these outcomes, values are a factor to be rationally considered when an individual makes decisions.

As mentioned previously, Alberta policies did not contain strong connections between good decisions and ethical decisions. However, there were several curricular outcomes that bridged the two. The social studies curriculum’s description of critical thinking identified the importance of “considering the ethics of decisions and actions” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 8). The secondary health program of studies expected students to “identify components of ethical decision making, and apply these concepts to personal decision making” (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 24). As a result, Alberta policies were perceived to identify the individual as an ethical decision-maker who uses reasoning and critical thinking as the primary means to make ethical decisions.

In summary, Alberta policies emphasized the nature of the individual as a moral agent. The individual was identified as the primary focus of education represented in Alberta policies as both an end in itself and the means by which a strong society is built. The virtuous individual was identified as one who has both a self-interested orientation to excellence and success as well as a focus on the success and well-being of others. Finally, a key means to achieving success and well-being for themselves and others was identified as an individual’s ability to engage in rational ethical decision-making. Having described the moral agency of the individual in the policies, the next theme addresses the nature of the good society.

### ***Theme Two: Nature of the Good Society***

Alberta policies identified the focus on the interests of others, including society, as a key component of an individual’s moral agency. The nature of what is in society’s

interest or what constitutes the good society was the second theme identified in the data. My analysis led me to identify four subthemes of the second theme. The good society was identified as being democratic. The good society was also viewed as embracing pluralism, particularly as it is manifested through social, cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity. Third, the good society was identified as socially cohesive, with citizens sharing common values. Last, society is civil, particularly in relation to how conflicts are addressed.

**Subtheme: Democratic.** According to Alberta policies, the desirable society was explicitly identified as democratic. The *Education Act (2023)* identified education as “the foundation of a democratic and civil society” with “citizens who demonstrate democratic ideals” (p 13). The Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2024) also identified that students were to “understand the rights and benefits of democratic citizenship” (p. 1), “participate knowledgeably and responsibly in a democratic society” (p. 5).

The curriculum guiding framework (Alberta Education, 2024b) stated that “the curriculum plays a vital role in preparing students to participate fully in a democratic and civil society” (p. 19), and further stated that “the curriculum will also prepare students to understand the need for civic responsibility within a democracy that fosters empathy” (p. 18). Social studies was the only curricular area that explicitly and substantively addressed democracy. Although many of the social studies goals and outcomes related to students developing an objective understanding of the nature and history of democracy, the program of studies also explicitly “encouraged students to affirm their place in an inclusive, democratic society” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 1). In this way, Alberta education policies connected with the social studies curriculum reflected a view of

education as a means of reinforcing the fundamental political structure of Albertan and Canadian society.

**Subtheme: Embraces pluralism and diversity.** Pluralism, in Alberta policies, was identified as both the nature of Canadian society is and the nature of what society ought to be. Alberta's policies generally described the role of education in preparing students to constructively engage in a desirably diverse society. It was also observed that pluralism was described in interpersonal terms, in which the conflicts are between individuals' values, and in intercultural terms, in which the conflicts are between groups or cultures. The following data excerpts illustrate those observations.

Pluralism was explicitly addressed as a consideration in the Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum, which stated:

As a pluralistic society, Alberta recognizes and supports unity and a commitment to the common good among a diverse citizenry. A peaceful, pluralistic society and an energized civilization requires respect and mutual understanding among people of different faiths, experiences, and backgrounds. The curriculum will provide coherent foundational learning to help students develop a respectful understanding of the contributions of the many linguistic, cultural, and ethnic groups in Canada. (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 18)

The first sentence of the preceding passage indicated both recognition of and support for a diverse citizenry but does not indicate support for a plurality of values. Its reference to unity and the common good only speaks to some type of unarticulated ideal. As such, while this passage reflected a view of pluralism as both a descriptor of society

as well as what ought to be, the pluralism described is essentially interpersonal or intercultural.

Pluralism as a desirable characteristic of the good society was further identified at multiple levels of policy. The Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2024) contained multiple statements that outlined the desirability of pluralism, albeit without using the specific term, which was typically framed in terms of perspectives or viewpoints. It stated that “Education in Alberta will promote...respect for difference” (p. 1), “where multiple perspectives are encouraged” (p. 1). It also outlined that students would “have opportunities to build evidence-based viewpoints...while learning a diversity of viewpoints in an inclusive environment where...multiple perspectives are encouraged and respected” (p. 2). The language in these policy statements reflected a view of pluralism as primarily interpersonal.

Pluralism, as described in policies, generally addressed issues of identity or perspective. Belonging and identity were described as valuable in the *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum*, which included a description of the diverse identity attributes to be embraced. It stated:

Albertans from varied backgrounds will see themselves in the curriculum, regardless of race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, or any other factor(s), both in their common humanity and in the diversity of valuable contributions to society. (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 18)

This policy statement described diversity as having to do with characteristics of and differences between people, once again focusing on pluralism as interpersonal.

The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) stated as a specific goal, that “diversity is an essential part of the human condition and students will learn the value of all people” (p. 19). It further identified a number of defining characteristics for curriculum that included elements of pluralism. It stated that “The curriculum will... incorporate a diverse range of insights, understandings, and perspectives” (p. 5). It also stated that the curriculum will “set out what students need to know to understand the pluralistic society and culture that they will inherit” (p. 17) and “draw upon diverse heritages and particularly upon the diverse traditions that have shaped Alberta” (p. 17). As with the previous extracts from the policy texts, these statements described pluralism as interpersonal and intercultural. The intercultural view of pluralism was generalized in the policy statements described so far; however, there were also a number of policy elements that identified specific cultural perspectives to be understood and appreciated; those of Francophones and First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives were emphasized in a number of the more current policies, which makes sense as those policies were implemented following the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action being released in 2015. The curriculum framework (Alberta Education, 2024b) indicated that “the curriculum will incorporate a diverse range of insights, understandings, and perspectives...such as Alberta’s First Nations, Métis, and Inuit (and their knowledge, language, and pedagogies) (p. 5). It further stated that the curriculum will “respectfully include First Nations, Métis, and Inuit histories, contributions, and perspectives” (p. 11). Specific curricular outcomes were identified in the kindergarten through grade 6 programs of study. These included English

language arts and literature’s goal of developing students’ understanding that “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communication processes and protocols can preserve shared knowledge” (Alberta Education, 2023a, p. 47). In mathematics, students were to understand “First Nations, Métis, and Inuit representations of data” (Alberta Education, 2023a, p. 29). The physical education and wellness model was described as respecting and honouring “traditional ways of knowing and being for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit...Through diverse viewpoints, including First Nations, Métis, Inuit and Francophone perspectives, all students benefit from a deeper understanding and appreciation of various communities and cultures” (Alberta Education, 2022, p. 1). The elementary science program (Alberta Education, 2023c) included many outcomes describing goals for students to understand First Nations, Métis, and Inuit perspectives such as “all things are interconnected” (p. 23), “water is sacred” (p. 24), and “humans have a responsibility to care for nature” (p. 10).

Alberta’s *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* (Alberta Education, 2020) stated that “Francophone communities in Alberta continue to grow and actively contribute to Alberta’s economy, cultural mosaic, and society as a whole... Francophone communities are a vibrant and integral part of Alberta society” (p. 11) as a guiding consideration. At the curriculum level, the kindergarten through grade 6 science program of studies stated that “learning about Francophone... contributions to science helps all students gain a better understanding of the diversity of the scientific community and the collaborative and dynamic nature of science” (p. 1). The social studies curriculum (2005b) stated that “For historical and

constitutional reasons, an understanding of Canada requires an understanding of Francophone perspectives of Francophone experiences” (p. 4).

Pluralism and diversity of perspectives were most substantively addressed in the social studies program of studies. The social studies curriculum front matter also addressed the importance of diversity as an asset. “Pluralism: Diversity and Cohesion” was identified as a program foundation, further described as follows:

A key component of effective social organizations, communities and institutions is recognition of diversity of experiences and perspectives. The program of studies emphasizes how diversity and differences are assets that enrich our lives. Students will have opportunities to value diversity, to recognize differences as positive attributes and to recognize the evolving nature of individual identities. Race, socioeconomic conditions and gender are among various forms of identification that people live with and experience in a variety of ways. (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 5)

It also contained many outcomes that encouraged appreciation for diverse perspectives. For example, students were to appreciate “the existence of multiple perspectives in a globalizing world” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 20), “multiple perspectives that exist with respect to the relationships among politics, economics, the environment and globalization” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 23), “various perspectives regarding identity and ideology” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 20) and “various perspectives regarding the relationship between individualism and common good” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 20). At the junior high level, students were to “demonstrate a willingness to consider differing beliefs, values and worldviews” (Alberta Education,



2006, p. 4). Whereas the diversity of perspectives in the curriculum guiding framework were overwhelmingly intercultural, the social studies outcomes emphasized an appreciation of value pluralism in general.

Overall, Alberta policies clearly view pluralism as desirable, but there was a noteworthy exception. Section 58 of the *Education Act* (2023) allowed parents to opt their children out of instruction that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality. In relation to the third theme, the roles that religion and sexuality hold in Alberta policies are discussed in more detail, but it is important to note here that exposure to multiple perspectives regarding religion and sexuality may be intentionally limited. This appears contradictory to the enthusiasm for diversity expressed in Alberta policies in general.

In Alberta policy, pluralism was not viewed as an isolated characteristic of a good society. It was described as being strongly connected to the other two subthemes, shared values and civility.

**Subtheme: Shared values.** The subtheme of shared values focused on the nature of relationships in terms of the shared interests and common values that are seen as contributing to social cohesion. The following subtheme, civility, discusses elements relating to interpersonal interactions are discussed as part of the following subtheme, civility. These two subthemes frequently appeared in connection with each other in the data, yet I determined the presence of each in the data to be sufficiently discreet to make a distinction.

The *Education Act* provided direction that “All courses or programs of study and instructional materials used in a school must...honour and respect the common values

and beliefs of Albertans (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 31). The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* stated that “students will demonstrate collaboration by seeking to understand what is shared in common despite apparent or actual differences” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 24). In the program of studies, the subtheme of shared values was most prominent within the social studies curriculum, being identified explicitly as a goal in the program of studies front matter. “Social studies helps students to function as citizens in a society that values diversity and cohesion” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 4). The program vision for social studies states that it “emphasizes the importance of diversity and respect for differences as well as the need for social cohesion in the effective functioning of society” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 1).

In addition to the values of diversity and cohesion, several others were prominently identified in policies as desirable common values to be shared by Alberta society members. It is important to note that the previously discussed subthemes of a good society's theme nature could also be considered shared values. As discussed in relation to each so far, they were each deemed as desirable or valuable in one or more policies. This further exemplifies the integrated nature of the themes identified in this analysis. However, what follows is a discussion of other shared values that were more explicitly connected to cohesiveness.

Justice, fairness, and equity were three values frequently identified as desirable common values to be held by citizens. These terms were often used somewhat interchangeably or in some combination with each other, as if referring to a single concept. Even their definitions, as provided in the elementary social studies curriculum,

use each other. For example, fairness was defined as “justice; equity; the state of being consistent with rules, logic or ethics” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 9). The importance of these shared values in a democratic society was illustrated in the Ministerial Order, which stated that “Education in Alberta will promote the acquisition of skills and the pursuit of knowledge with wisdom, while valuing equality of opportunity” (Government of Alberta 2024, p. 1). The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* stated that “education will ensure that Alberta is always a place of freedom, security, equal opportunity” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 6) Citizens are also expected to “treat others ethically, with fairness and equity and by demonstrating social justice when taking action” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 3). The social studies curriculum further stated, “Pluralism requires support for social justice for all people and groups to ensure that students are not prevented from realizing the full benefits of participation in society” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 8).

The kindergarten through grade 6 physical education and wellness curriculum and the grade 7 through 10 physical education program identified fair play as a quality of positive interactions with others as a stated curricular outcome throughout all grades, but it appeared more as a basic expectation of class participation and was usually connected with demonstrating an understanding of the rules and etiquette of games (Alberta Education, 2000b, 2022). Social studies was the sole curricular area to include a substantive focus on justice, fairness, and equity, and these concepts had a significant presence across all grade levels. The program and philosophy identified “supporting the equality of all human beings” and “demonstrating social compassion, fairness and justice” (Alberta Education, 2005c, p. 2) as core program attitudes and values. Within the

curricular strand focusing on power, authority, and decision-making, “justice and laws, fairness and equity” (Alberta Education, 2005c, p. 7) were identified as key concepts to be examined. The grade 6 program outcomes specifically identified justice and equity as specific fundamental principles of democracy, and further asked students to “analyze how the democratic ideals of equity and fairness have influenced legislation in Canada over time” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 3). Fairness and equity were also identified as common values associated with social studies outcomes related to conflict resolution, which is explored further as it related to the next subtheme of civility.

**Subtheme: Civility.** Democratic and civil society was identified in the *Education Act* as a foundational product of the education system. Other key policies also included the description of a desirable civil society. The Ministerial Order stated that “Students will learn about ...the importance of political participation and engagement, the rule of law, and civil discourse and respectful dialogue” (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 5) The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* stated that “the curriculum plays a vital role in preparing students to participate fully in a democratic and civil society” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 19). Beyond that, the label of civil as a desired characteristic of society was not mentioned prominently in the policies, including the curriculum. In addition, the term civility was only used once in one of the examined policies. However, examination of the data identified significant descriptions in policies for how individuals were to interact with each other, particularly in situations of disagreement. While these policy statements shared many similar elements, there was not a specific term or group of terms that seemed to work as an encompassing label to describe this subtheme. As such, I chose to

use the term civility which has been defined by Bejan (2013), as “the social rules of respectful behavior... and as a conversational virtue meant to mediate and moderate disagreement between individuals” (p. 26) as it seemed to capture the concepts described in the policies.

The discussion of previous subthemes highlighted the perceived value of diversity and common values in Alberta policies. However, a consequence of diversity acknowledged in policies was the existence of uncommon values, which may be connected to individual or group identities. The Ministerial Order addressed this as part of an identified priority to prepare students for the future by stating “Students will learn foundational life skills that will enable them to...build healthy relationships, manage and resolve conflicts” (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 4).

This passage highlighted the need for students to manage and resolve conflicts. Other policies identified some parameters for how that would happen. These arose primarily in the health and social studies curricula. Both curricular outcomes addressed issues of identifying and responding to conflict, but the health curriculum focused on conflict at a personal level, whereas the social studies program had, additionally, a more conceptual focus.

The grade 7 through 11 health program of studies (Alberta Education, 2002b) addressed conflict management within the relationship choices general outcome as a necessary component to “establish and maintain healthy interactions” (p. 13). Specific outcomes that addressed conflict management existed at all grade levels. Consistent amongst these outcomes were references to the goal of conflict resolution. For example, grade 7, students were to “evaluate and personalize the effectiveness of various styles of

conflict resolution” (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 19). There was an evolution in the complexity of conflict management strategies developed over the grades with increased specificity of skills, including finding common ground, negotiation, and mediation. All of these strategies and skills were to be used for the “promotion of peaceful relationships” (Alberta Education, 2002b, p. 19).

Any identification of how students are to deal with situations when conflicts cannot be resolved was a noticeable absence in the health curriculum. There was nothing in the policies that addresses the nature of this omission, and the potential importance of this is explored further in chapter 5. Taken as a whole, the health program of study’s focus on the resolution of conflict and maintenance of peaceful relationships reflected the value of civility in interpersonal interactions.

The social studies curriculum also approached conflict quite explicitly and did so from a conceptual point of view through student examination of historical and contemporary societal conflicts. The social studies program of studies identified “cooperation, conflict resolution and consensus building” (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 2) as a benchmark skills and processes in grades 1 through 9, and the demonstration of these skills was present as a specific outcome in each grade level. In some grades, there was further elaboration on how students were to do this. For example, in grade 2, students are to “deal constructively with diversity and disagreement and work and play in harmony with others to create a safe and caring environment consider the needs and ideas of others” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 6). In grade 5, students were expected to “consider multiple points of view while attempting to reach group consensus demonstrate the ability to deal constructively with diversity and disagreement work collaboratively with

others to achieve a common goal” (Alberta Education, 2005b, p. 10). At the grade 8 level, students were to “demonstrate skills of cooperation, conflict resolution and consensus building, identify and use a variety of strategies to resolve conflicts peacefully and fairly, and consider the needs and perspectives of others” (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 8). Compromise as a strategy through which conflict could be resolved was added at the upper levels of junior high and high school social studies, as evidenced by outcomes that included “demonstrating skills of compromise and devising strategies to reach group consensus” (Alberta Education, 2006, p. 5) and “demonstrating skills of cooperation, conflict resolution and consensus building and employing various strategies to resolve conflicts peacefully and equitably and participate in persuading, compromising and negotiating to resolve conflicts and differences” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 18). These outcomes consistently reflected an ideal of civility and an assumption that conflict resolution was possible, as was the case in the health program of studies.

However, in contrast to the kindergarten through grade 9 curriculum, Alberta’s high school social studies program of studies did specifically address the nature and importance of what it identified as controversial issues. This emphasis on controversial issues is substantively addressed only at the senior high school level, where each course is structured around a key issue and multiple related issues.

The program of studies defined controversial issues and described their importance as follows:

Controversial issues are those topics that are publicly sensitive and upon which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. They include topics on which reasonable people may sincerely disagree. Opportunities to deal with these issues

are an integral part of social studies education in Alberta. Studying controversial issues is important in preparing students to participate responsibly in a democratic and pluralistic society. Such study provides opportunities to develop the ability to think clearly, to reason logically, to open- mindedly and respectfully examine different points of view and to make sound judgments. Controversial issues that have been anticipated by the teacher, and those that may arise incidentally during instruction, should be used by the teacher to promote critical inquiry and teach thinking skills. (Alberta Education, 2005c, p. 6)

In table 2, I provide a summary of the controversial issues as articulated within the social studies program of studies (Alberta Education, 2007).

**Table 2**

*Focus Issues of Alberta High School Social Studies Curriculum*

| Grade    | Key issue                                       | Related issues   |
|----------|---|--|
| Grade 10 | To what extent should we embrace globalization? | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To what extent should globalization shape identity?</li> <li>2. To what extent should contemporary society respond to the legacies of historical globalization?</li> <li>3. To what extent does globalization contribute to sustainable prosperity for all people?</li> <li>4. To what extent should I, as a citizen, respond to globalization?</li> </ol> |
| Grade 11 | To what extent should we embrace nationalism?   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To what extent should nation be the foundation of identity?</li> <li>2. To what extent should national interest be pursued?</li> <li>3. To what extent should internationalism be pursued?</li> <li>4. To what extent should individuals and groups in Canada embrace a national identity?</li> </ol>  |
| Grade 12 | To what extent should we embrace an ideology?   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. To what extent should ideology be the foundation of identity?</li> <li>2. To what extent is resistance to liberalism justified?</li> <li>3. To what extent are the principles of liberalism viable?</li> <li>4. To what extent should my actions as a citizen be shaped by an ideology?</li> </ol>   |



Related to their exploration of these issues, students were expected to, amongst other things, “assess the validity of information based on context, bias, sources, objectivity, evidence or reliability,” “synthesize information from contemporary and historical issues,” and “develop a reasoned position that is informed by historical and contemporary evidence” (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 17). The issues presented were highly conceptual, and the social studies program clearly emphasized a rational approach to individuals developing their own personal position. The issues did not make connections to the role they, as students or future citizens, may play in a practical application related to them. There was also no mention in the program of studies of how individuals, communities, or societies are to deal with the existence of conflicting views on these issues. As such, although the issues explored in high school social studies had no consensus, students were expected to participate in persuading, compromising, and negotiating to resolve conflicts and differences peacefully and equitably, once again emphasizing the importance of civility as a critical element of the good society.

In summary, this section explored the theme of the good society arising from the analysis of Alberta policies. Within this theme, the subthemes of democracy, embracing diversity and pluralism, shared values, and civility emerged as key elements of how Alberta policies identified a good society.

### ***Theme Three: School as a Nexus for Common and Uncommon Values***

The third theme that emerged focused on schools as a subset of society. That is to say, schools were viewed as places where different individuals, communities, and their values converged. This role of the schools as a nexus showed up in the data in two ways. Some policy elements ascribed value to the role schools play in supporting common

values that exist in society. Other policies emphasized the school's role in addressing some conflicting societal values. Whereas the two themes discussed previously arose from policy elements that explicitly addressed the nature of the individual as a moral agent or the nature of the good society in terms of Alberta policies' stated goals and outcomes, this theme addressed systems and structures within schools that would typically be considered elements of the hidden curriculum. As such, students' exposure to these systems and structures and the resultant impact on their value development would be less consistent and predictable than it would be to the policy elements identified within the first two themes. However, these structures were specifically identified in Alberta policies, including provincial statutes, and sufficient legislative debate around their implementation existed, so these policy elements were determined to be relevant to the study.

**Subtheme: Supporting common values.** The *Education Act* (2023) set in statute the expectations for the education system in Alberta. These expectations included many elements that described required or prohibited activities, processes, or structures within the school system. A number of these expectations for schools were intended to reinforce the common values of society. For example, section 16(1) of the *Education Act* stated this specifically:

All courses or programs of study and instructional materials used in a school must reflect the diverse nature and heritage of society in Alberta, promote understanding and respect for others and honour and respect the common values and beliefs of Albertans. (2023, p. 31)

This statement highlighted the values of respect and diversity for all elements of instructional content and materials to be used in schools. In contrast to the embrace of diversity discussed in theme two, the term respect is used. This is also true in one of the preamble statements of the Act: “students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self” (*Education Act*, 2023, p. 13). As the Act represented the statutory obligations, not necessarily the aspirational vision for education, this difference is not inconsequential. It sets a minimum threshold of acceptable behaviours for schools.

The establishment of benchmark expectations occurred in other relevant sections of the *Education Act* as well; most notably those that dealt with the basic responsibilities of students, parents, and boards - sections 31, 32, and 33 respectively. Each of these groups was charged with some variation of contributing to, or providing, a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment, but it was in the responsibilities of the board that a standard of acceptability and required processes for ensuring the standard is upheld were described. In Alberta, school boards were required to establish a code of conduct for students that identified acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, including bullying, as well as statements about consequences for unacceptable behaviour. The *Education Act* also tethered itself to the Alberta Human Rights Act as representative of the shared values of Albertans by identifying, as a minimum expectation, that students were entitled to all of the rights as outlined in the Alberta Human Rights Act and therefore were to be free from discrimination on any grounds set out in that Act. As a result, this section of Alberta policies defined the required level of respect for diversity in schools, that being the absence of bullying or discrimination (*Education Act*, 2023).

Two additional sections of the *Education Act (2023)* further outlined requirements for schools connected to their obligation to provide welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environments. Section 35 identified the establishment of “Bullying Awareness and Prevention Week”, and section 35.1 outlined the obligation of schools to approve student organizations or student organized activities intended to promote a welcoming, caring, respectful, and safe learning environment (*Education Act, 2023*). Section 35 is an example of a policy that reflects the common values of Albertans, but the analysis of the policy and its related political debate highlighted that it also contained elements that were challenged by uncommon values held amongst Albertans, which are discussed in the next subtheme.

**Subtheme: Addressing uncommon values.** Throughout the qualitative document content analysis so far of Alberta’s policies related to moral education, most of the themes and subthemes identified presented themselves as largely consistent within and amongst one another. That is to say, the discussion of Alberta policies so far has contained very little in terms of identified conflict. A sole exception was presented earlier in the discussion of the diversity subtheme, with the identification of the parental opt-out provision for instruction pertaining to religion or sexuality. Section 58.1(1) of the *Education Act (2023)* required a school board to “provide notice to a parent of a student where courses, programs of study or instructional materials, or instruction or exercises, include subject-matter that deals primarily and explicitly with religion or human sexuality” (p. 69). According to Section 58(2), the school was required to exclude said child from such instruction upon receiving a written request signed by a parent. This was a specific situation in a formal policy that reflected Alberta’s emphasis on parental rights.

Parental rights were enshrined in a couple of additional sections of the *Education Act* (2023). The preamble stated, “Parents have the right and the responsibility to make informed decisions respecting the education of their children” (*Education Act*, 2023, p. 13). Section 32 provided parents with the “prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be provided to the parent’s child” (*Education Act*, 2023, p. 46). Section 32, when first introduced as part of the 2013 *Education Act*, was “one of the first in the country to formally recognize the role of the family and the parent in education” (Johnson, 2012, p. 155). This comment by the Minister of Education upon introducing the Act as Bill 3 highlighted the importance that Alberta placed on parental rights with regards to their children’s education. The preamble and section 32 of the Act provided context to the parental opt-out provision in section 58. Policies, on the other hand, did not provide any explanation for why issues of religion and sexuality were viewed as distinct from all other elements of the curriculum.

Getting an understanding of why religion and sexuality may have been considered unique in Alberta policies required an additional examination of the origins of the clause in section 58. That particular clause came out of Bill 44: Human Rights, Citizenship, and Multiculturalism Amendment Act in 2009. In addition, Bill 44 added sexual orientation to the prohibited grounds for discrimination criteria. In review of the legislative debate on Bill 44, Rob Anderson, a member of the governing Progressive Conservative Party, described the inclusion of the clause as supportive of the rights of parents during the legislative debate, stating:

This section, in accordance with article 26(3) of the United Nations universal declaration of human rights enshrines as a human right a parent’s right to choose

whether or not their child shall be taught controversial subject matter that may offend their family's most personal and closely held beliefs. Specifically, this refers to curriculum that explicitly teaches religion, sexuality, or sexual orientation. (Anderson, 2009a, p. 1009)

On another occasion, Anderson (2009b) argued:

Intolerance is an unwillingness to recognize and respect differences in opinion and beliefs; intolerance is narrow-mindedness about another's cherished opinions. That is the definition of intolerance. Now, Bill 44 allows parents to quietly choose, when they believe that two very narrow subjects are being taught to their children and they want to be the first ones to teach those innocent children these subjects, to make that first impression on their minds about religion and about sexuality. They want to make sure that in these most delicate topics they have first dibs on their kids, so to speak. So we're giving them the option here of being able to pull their children out for these narrow topics and give parents first dibs on their children. (p. 1467)

On the other hand, the Alberta Hansard showed that opponents of Bill 44 described this clause as a means by which discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation would be perpetuated. For example, Notley (2009) stated:

We're going to treat that prohibited ground [sexual orientation] differently from all the other prohibited grounds because some people think that parents need to have the right to recognize the personal and sensitive core beliefs that they need to message and parent their kids with. Apparently, we as parents need to be able to shelter our children from one of the prohibited grounds in the human rights code

of this province. We're not giving parents the opportunity to exclude their children from instruction on other races. We're not giving parents the legal opportunity to exclude their children from instruction on other cultures. We are not giving parents the legal opportunity to exclude their children from instruction on other genders. But we are going to give parents the legal opportunity to exclude their children from discussion about sexual orientation. (p. 1012)

In addition, Blakeman (2009) stated that

We're now allowing people to pull their kids out of school through some definition that's not very clear around religion, human sexuality, and sexual orientation. But we don't get into those larger issues now of dealing with difference and tolerance and analysis and critical thinking that we're supposed to be bringing our kids through this system for. I mean, how do we get there if kids are pulled out of class whenever a topic might be offensive or troublesome for their parents? ... Have we taken children in and taught them how to do critical analysis, to deal with difficult subjects, to be challenged around their tolerance? (p. 1462)

It should be noted that one consequence of Bill 10, to be discussed next, was to remove specific reference to sexual orientation from the duty to notify and parental opt-out clauses, leaving the current wording in the *School Act* from 2014 through 2019 and in the current *Education Act*.

A thorough analysis of the parental notification and opt-out policy was beyond the scope of this study, but examination of the written policy and the debate surrounding its origins made it clear that the Alberta policies identified both student rights and parental

rights as being valued. It also acknowledged that parents' values may differ from those espoused in the curriculum, and it prioritized parental rights in limited circumstances as a means of addressing conflicting or uncommon values. On the surface, this was a rights debate, but it had significant implications for how value conflicts are addressed with regards to sexuality education in Alberta. In this situation, Alberta policy, in the form of section 58.1(1) of the *Education Act*, actively permits students to be exempted for situations in which their students may be exposed to values about sexuality that differ from their parents. In essence, it is a policy of conflict avoidance.

A similar policy challenge was found to exist with regards to section 35.1 of the *Education Act*, Support for Student Organizations. This policy existed in multiple forms in different locations and within different statutes, beginning with 2014's Bill 10: An Act to Amend the Alberta Bill of Rights to Protect Children. In general, this clause and related changes to other legislation was described as "supporting the government's zero-tolerance attitude towards bullying, which is unacceptable whether it's related to sexual orientation, race, religion, or any other factor" (Janzen, 2014a, p. 238), by supporting the establishment of antidiscrimination clubs, including gay-straight alliances. Although the core of the policy remained the same, its evolution led to some key differences amongst the various iterations.

The 2014 Bill 10 iteration provided a means of recourse that students could take should the school or board deny their request to establish an antidiscrimination club including a gay-straight alliance. This recourse included a board appeal, an application for judicial review, and a review of the minister. Under the New Democratic Party government, 2017's Bill 24 made two key changes by replacing the appeal process with



the requirement that principals immediately approve such requests and adding the prohibition for schools to inform parents if their child was participating in such a student organization. Following another change in governing party in 2019, Bill 8 eliminated the immediacy requirement for approval and the prohibition on schools communicating about their student's participation in such clubs or organizations.

As was the case with the debates over Bill 44, the debate over Bills 10, 24, and 8 were, on the surface, rights debates. However, once again, the core issue at the heart of the rights debate was about how to deal with potentially conflicting values around human sexuality with regards to parental notification about their children's involvement with student organizations, including gay straight alliances. In this case, the policy evolved during the examination period. From 2017 to 2019, the legislation provided absolute support for students to choose to engage with values around human sexuality that may conflict with the values of their parents. During this time, there was a notification restriction in place that would prevent the student's parents from knowing, thereby reducing or eliminating possible confrontation between students and their parents over their potentially conflicting values. Again, this was essentially a policy of conflict avoidance. Legislation changed in 2019 eliminating the firm prohibition of parental notification, but the guidance from the government is still strongly supportive of conflict avoidance by discouraging parental notification unless warranted in individual circumstances.

The relationship between Alberta education policies and society is not unidirectional. Whereas the first two identified themes spoke primarily to the preparation of students to engage as ethical citizens within a good society, the school is also a nexus

for the convergence of society's values. The analysis of policies identified some instances in which school systems responded to perceived common values, such as the establishment and enforcement of student codes of conduct to reinforce non-discrimination. The policy analysis also identified two situations in which Alberta policies attempted to respond to potential exposure to conflicting values by essentially seeking to avoid value conflicts. In the case of parental opt-out for religious or human sexuality instruction, potential conflicts between parental and school (curricular) values can be avoided at the parents' discretion. In the case of gay-straight alliance notification, potential conflicts over values around sexuality between students and their parents were completely or mostly avoided. These policies may, depending on students' active involvement with them, expand or limit the range of values to which students are exposed in schools.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I identified the themes that describe the nature and scope of Alberta's education policies as they relate to moral education. In the first theme, I identified that Alberta education policies reflected a view of the individual person as a moral agent who is of primary importance as an individual and as an ethical decision-maker, for whom an orientation towards personal success and the well-being of others are considered virtuous. In the second theme, I identified that Alberta education policies reflected a view of the good society as: being democratic, embracing pluralism, having commonly shared core values, and being civil. In the third theme, I identified that Alberta education policies reflected a view of the school as a nexus for supporting common values and addressing uncommon values.

Although the themes were each presented as objective and discreet concepts in their articulation, their existence in the policies was highly integrated, and the inductive process that identified them was highly interpretive. As a result, these themes did not represent a comprehensive analysis of an Alberta moral education policy, as no such explicit policy existed, but they did provide a substantive accounting for identifiable elements of moral education that were implicit throughout Alberta education policies. After reviewing the identified themes, only the first two directly reflected a moral education mandate for Alberta students as citizens. The third theme of the school as a nexus for common and uncommon values addressed parameters around school operations that, although related, did not speak directly to the moral educational goals of Alberta but had the potential to impact those goals.

In summary, the three resultant themes and subthemes as described in this chapter provide a fairly comprehensive view of the nature and scope of Alberta's moral education agenda, which will be discussed in terms of Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism in chapter 5.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

The research questions sought to identify 1) the nature and scope of moral education in Alberta's schools as evidenced by government documents, Ministerial policies, and legislative debates, and 2) how Alberta's policies related to moral education addressed, if at all, the pluralistic nature of Alberta's society. In Chapter 4, I addressed the first of those two questions describing the nature and scope of moral education in Alberta policies. In this chapter, I discuss the second research question, how Alberta's moral education policies addressed the pluralistic nature of Alberta's society. This discussion begins with an examination of the themes identified in the previous chapter through the lens of Berlin's value pluralism as articulated in the conceptual framework for pluralist moral education described in chapter 2. Then I identify the key insights arising from the studies' analyses. Last, I discuss the potential implications of the findings.

### **Berlinian Analysis of the Themes Identified in Alberta Policies**

#### ***Pluralism in Alberta Policies***

Pluralism in Alberta moral education policies was discussed explicitly in chapter 4 in the context of the second subtheme related to the nature of the good society. That description, which addressed Alberta's embracing of pluralism and diversity as a core element of the good society, reflected the use of the term pluralism in the Alberta policy texts as well as in policy statements reflecting the concept of pluralism even when the term itself was not explicitly used. As described in chapter 4, pluralism was used to describe both factual and desired characteristics of society. The articulation of society's pluralist reality in Alberta policies is particularly relevant to my investigation of value

incommensurability and incompatibility.

Although Alberta policies failed to provide a clear definition of what was meant by pluralism, it was frequently presented in terms of the existence and acceptance of diverse group identities. The *Guiding Framework for the Development of the Kindergarten through Grade 12 Curriculum* identified “people of different faiths, experiences, and backgrounds...linguistic cultural, and ethnic groups” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 18). It also identified additional identity characteristics of “race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 19), which expanded the scope of diversity that was to be reflected in and developed by the education system.

Although Alberta policies alluded to value differences amongst cultural groups or individuals, the existence of value pluralism was not specifically addressed in the policies. Rather, the policy texts commonly referred to multiple perspectives that were frequently, but not exclusively, connected to group identity. In chapter 4, I provided a number of specific examples from the social studies curriculum as the primary policy text that addressed the understanding, acceptance of, and appreciation for diverse perspectives, including those with respect to politics, economics, the environment, globalization, identity, and ideology (Alberta Education, 2005b). Although the social studies curriculum indicated that students were to consider differing beliefs, values, and worldviews (Alberta Education, 2006), there was nowhere in that policy text or any other provincial policies that addressed the possibility that these beliefs, values, or worldviews may be incommensurable or incompatible.

### *Value Incommensurability and Incompatibility in Alberta Policies*

Although Alberta policies did not address the incommensurability or incompatibility of values explicitly, some of the policies acknowledged the existence of conflicts, which were described under the subtheme of civility in chapter 4. As described in that section, conflict was approached from both an interpersonal competency perspective in the health curriculum and a theoretical perspective in the social studies curriculum. In both cases, the emphasis was exclusively on resolving conflict peacefully using cooperation, mediation, negotiation, and consensus-building (Alberta Education, 2002b, 2005b, 2006, 2007). As a result, conflicts appear to be rationally resolvable, and there was no indication that students, or teachers for that matter, were to consider the possibility of what Berlin termed agonizing choices throughout their kindergarten through grade 9 education in Alberta.

Upon reaching senior high school, the social studies curriculum did introduce controversial issues, those for which there is no consensus of values or beliefs. It also introduced compromise as a strategy to address conflict. As discussed in chapter 4, the outcomes focused on the development of rational problem-solving skills in relation to these issues, not the value conflicts themselves (Alberta Education, 2007). As a result, while the issues may have involved incommensurate or incompatible values, exploring those conflicts was not an explicit outcome for students. As a result, there were no specific learning outcomes within the Alberta program of studies that required students to understand the incommensurate and incompatible nature of many values and consider how they would apply that understanding in terms of their own ethical development and future decisions.

In chapter 4, the subtheme of addressing uncommon values addressed the unique roles that issues related to sexuality and religion played in Alberta policies. With regards to instruction in these two areas, Alberta implemented a policy that appeared to be largely based on a belief that the related values and beliefs of some parents were potentially incompatible with those that may be taught in schools, including specific health program outcomes. According to that policy, in cases where they chose, parents were able to prevent their children from encountering beliefs about religion or sexuality that differed from those they desired them to hold. Ironically, while the provision of parental opt-out for human sexuality education could be viewed as an attempt by the Alberta government to address what it saw as a conflict between incommensurable and incompatible views on human sexuality education, the government of Alberta's parental notification and opt-out policy may have actually further reduced the potential exposure of some students to the incommensurate and incompatible nature of some values.

The absence of agonistic choices and conflicts in Alberta education policies identified so far only refers to conflicts among the views of different individuals (interpersonal pluralism) or among cultural groups (intercultural pluralism). There was also an additional omission that is significant from a Berlinian perspective. There was no discussion of true value pluralism of the nature that Berlin emphasized. No Alberta policies address the possibility of agonistic value conflicts within an individual because of the very nature of the values themselves. Nowhere in the policies was the possibility of no right or good decision addressed.

In sum, Alberta policies contained elements grounded in some understanding and acceptance of value incommensurability and incompatibility, but they failed to

substantively and explicitly address either. When value conflict was addressed, it was often implicit that resolution was possible, or, when issues without resolution were identified, they were abstract and impersonal. Internal or intrapersonal value conflicts were not addressed, as Alberta policies only focused on interpersonal or intercultural pluralism. As such, Alberta moral education policies generally failed to expose students to agonizing choices that arise from value incommensurability and incompatibility. In failing to do so, Alberta policies showed, to some extent, a tendency to sidestep the reality of value pluralism.

### ***Plurality of Legitimate Values in Alberta Policies***

The policies reviewed in this study included the mention or discussion of many different desirable values. Table 3 lists these various values identified within the three main themes identified in chapter 4. Given that these values were viewed as desirable within Alberta policies, it seems reasonable to infer that the province considers these as legitimate values consistent with Berlin's requirement. As discussed previously, however, Alberta policies fail to substantively address the possibility of conflicts within or between these values. Also not identified in Alberta policies is what does not qualify as a legitimate value. Berlin's description of what qualifies as a legitimate value is extremely broad but not inclusive of all possible values. By putting limits on the scope of legitimate human values, Berlin distinguishes his pluralism from moral relativism. Alberta policies' monistic pluralism, as described previously, may leave Alberta's moral education open to relativism.



**Table 3***Values Identified as Desirable in Alberta Policies*

| Theme 1 (Individual as a Moral Agent Values) | Theme 2 (Nature of the Good Society) Values | Theme 3 (School as a Nexus) Values |
|--|---|------------------------------------|
| adaptability                                 | civic engagement                            | diversity                          |
| bold decision-making                         | civility                                    | respect                            |
| compassion                                   | compromise                                  |                                    |
| diligence                                    | cooperation                                 |                                    |
| empathy                                      | democratic ideals                           |                                    |
| excellence                                   | diversity                                   |                                    |
| fulfillment                                  | equity                                      |                                    |
| honesty                                      | fairness                                    |                                    |
| integrity                                    | inclusiveness                               |                                    |
| perseverance                                 | justice                                     |                                    |
| resilience                                   | peace                                       |                                    |
| responsibility                               | pluralism                                   |                                    |
| risk-taking                                  | political participation                     |                                    |
| self-esteem                                  | social cohesion                             |                                    |
| self-reliance                                | toleration                                  |                                    |
| success                                      |   |                                    |
| teamwork                                     |   |                                    |
| tenacity                                     |   |                                    |

*Universal Values in Alberta Policies*

Given that Alberta policies failed to acknowledge conflicts or limitations in what are considered legitimate values, it is possible that all values identified in their policies could be considered universal. Doing so, however, would not be congruent with Berlin's belief that there is a limited number of goods that human beings can meaningfully value, such as: freedom, justice, pursuit of happiness, honesty, and love (Jahanbegloo, 2007). As such, it seems more accurate to assess Alberta's policies as failing to address the existence of universal values fundamental to the human experience.

*Negative Liberty in Alberta Policies*

Education policies in Alberta did not explicitly address issues of negative liberty,

but they implicitly addressed issues of liberty in two different contexts: that of a citizen and that of a student. Although there was overlap between the two, there were some distinctive elements of liberty that applied to the students within the school.

The terms liberty and freedom were seldom used in the policy texts, but the policies contained many references to the concept of rights. The Ministerial Order (Government of Alberta, 2024) stated that students will “understand the rights and benefits of democratic citizenship” (p. 1), “demonstrate an understanding of individual rights and freedoms, which are secured by Canadian law” (p. 5), and “learn the importance of individual rights” (p. 5).

The social studies curriculum included ninety-six mentions of individual, collective, or human rights, including numerous references to the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms as the benchmark for human rights entitlements in Canada. The front matter to the social studies curriculum described the importance for a citizen to “enjoy individual and collective rights and equitable status in contemporary society, . . .and feel that their identities are viewed as legitimate before they can contribute to the public good and feel a sense of belonging and empowerment as citizens” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 4). This description of citizens' rights in Canadian society, as a stated goal for Alberta policies, identified a minimal threshold of negative liberty congruent to that espoused by Berlin (2007) as essential to human experience.

Alberta's policies also sought a level of negative liberty for students within the context of schools. As discussed previously, one Alberta policy stated, “students are entitled to welcoming, caring, respectful and safe learning environments that respect diversity and nurture a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self” (*Education Act*,

2023, p. 13). Furthermore, all school boards in Alberta were required to establish a code of conduct tethered to the Alberta Human Rights Act, entitling students to all of its defined rights and setting a minimum threshold for student rights or liberty in schools.

### **Toleration in Alberta Policies**

Berlin (2000) viewed toleration as an essential component of maintaining stable and peaceful coexistence among individuals and groups with differing values and beliefs. Official Alberta policies, on the other hand, only referred explicitly to tolerance or toleration once, in the Science 10 program of studies, when it was included in a list of personal and social values that may arise from scientific and technological activity.

There were numerous references to tolerance and intolerance in the Hansard debates on Bill 44 and Bill 10 over the opt-out clause for education related to sexuality or religion. In these debates, tolerance was used to support arguments both in support of and in opposition to the opt-out policy. Opponents of the opt-out policy, such as Blakeman (2009) argued that allowing students to avoid offensive or troublesome topics fails to help them develop tolerance and prepare them to deal with larger issues of different values and beliefs. Anderson (2009b) argued that the opt-out clause was a means of demonstrating tolerance by respecting the differing values and beliefs of those who opt out.

In relation to moral education, Alberta policies did not place a substantive emphasis on toleration or tolerance.

### **Negotiating Agonistic Conflicts in Alberta Policies**

As previously discussed, Alberta policies failed to explicitly address value incommensurability and the potential existence of agonistic conflicts between values,

individuals, or groups. As a result, they also failed to substantively address means for negotiating such conflicts. While Alberta policies did not address agonistic conflicts, there were numerous mentions of conflict resolution, many of which were identified in the subtheme of civility. These primarily occurred in the social studies and health curricula, and all instances viewed conflicts as being resolvable. Given the current moral education policies in Alberta, it is conceivable that students could complete thirteen years of primary and secondary schooling without ever being exposed to or taught to negotiate agonistic or unresolvable conflicts.

### ***Summary***

Although Alberta policies substantively acknowledged pluralism as a key characteristic of Albertan and Canadian society, the nature of pluralism described in Alberta policies was more limited than articulated by Berlin. Alberta policies promoted pluralism as a societal preference, but they failed to address the inherent incommensurability and incompatibility of human values, or what Berlin termed agonistic choices. The lack of incorporating a robust pluralism in Alberta policies was exacerbated by the presence of both monist and relativist elements in those same policies. Last, Alberta policies clearly articulated a commitment to a minimum degree of negative liberty for both citizens and students to have a fulsome human experience.

### **Insights & Implications**

Three key insights arose from the descriptive and Berlinian analyses of Alberta policies. First, Alberta's moral education policies sought to develop and maintain a good society by developing ethical citizens who strove for individual success as well as the well-being of others. Second, moral education policies in Alberta failed to substantively

account for the incommensurability and incompatibility of human values. Last, moral education policies in Alberta contained potentially incommensurable and incompatible value conflict in their articulation of the good.

***Insight One: Moral education in Alberta Sought to develop and maintain a Good Society through the Development of Ethical Citizens who Strive for Individual Success as Well as the Well-being of Others***

As Alberta had no explicit moral education policy, there was no endorsement of any of the particular approaches to moral education described in chapter 2. Although the implicit moral education policies did not provide any pedagogical direction, the Alberta policies included a number of elements that were characteristic of various historical approaches to moral education.

In its very articulation of the ethical citizen as a goal of education in Alberta, policies placed significant importance on the individual citizen as an ethical being. In doing so, Alberta policies reflected traditional character education's belief that character, or the locus of morality, resides inside the individual as a set of virtues or traits (Arthur & Carr, 2013; Kristjánsson, 2013). This was most clearly reflected in the Ministerial Order's (2024) outcome which stated that "students develop honesty, integrity, and self-reliance through the application of their knowledge and skills...students will demonstrate a commitment to the common good by exercising compassion, empathy, and support for one another..." (Government of Alberta, 2024, p. 4). Alberta policies further demonstrated this belief in their identification of goal-orientedness, perseverance, and adaptability as specific desirable virtues. Alberta policies provided a rationale for these traits as virtues that would support individual success or excellence.

Alberta moral education policies adopted the emphasis on rational decision-making or reason that resides at the core of the cognitive-developmental approach (Kohlberg, 1981; Nucci, 2009; Piaget, 1965). Given the lack of explicitness in Alberta policies, it was unclear as to what universal principle(s), if any, students were to use in making ethical judgements. However, the common values of justice, fairness, and equity identified in policies equated to Kohlberg's focus on the principle of justice (1981).

The subtheme of ethical individuals having a focus on others showed characteristics of a third approach to moral education. Alberta's description of an ethical citizen as one who gives consideration to that which is beyond their self-interests and cares for the larger community is consistent with that espoused by Gilligan (1982) and Noddings (1988, 2002, 2008).

Thus far, this discussion has focused on the nature of the individual as a moral agent, but also relevant was Alberta policies' defined role of that moral agent in creating or maintaining the good society. Alberta policies, as discussed in the first two primary themes of chapter 4, substantively described the role of the individual in contributing to the good society but did not address the role of society in contributing to the individual in any significant manner. That description of the role, combined with the previously identified emphasis on the individual as a rational decision-maker, indicated that Alberta policies were reflective of a liberal view of the individual as a rationally autonomous agent.

A belief in the individual as rational and autonomous is consistent with liberalism and pervades the thoughts of Berlin (1958/2008) himself. However, Berlin also acknowledged the strong role that one's community and culture plays in the development

and determination of an individual's personal values (Jahanbegloo, 2007). Alberta policies fail to substantively account for the arguments by communitarians such as Haste (1996, 2008); Sandel, 1998; Walzer, 1983) that emphasize the interdependence of citizens and the social basis of meaning and morality. Young and Sneddon (2011) argued that neither the psychological assumptions underlying the liberal nor those underlying communitarian views on moral development and acquisition are empirically supported in their entirety. They stated that elements of both liberalism and communitarianism appeared to provide valid, but incomplete, accounts of value acquisition. They further argued a liberal approach focusing on liberty and toleration was preferred, as a communitarian approach could lead to immoral behaviour.

***Insight Two. Moral Education in Alberta Failed to Substantively Account for the Incommensurability and Incompatibility of Human Values***

As described in chapter 5, Alberta policies embraced a pluralism that mostly focused on religious, ethnic, or cultural diversity. Although Alberta policies alluded to value differences amongst cultural groups or individuals, the existence of incommensurable or incompatible values or beliefs was largely ignored. When conflicting perspectives were addressed, they were viewed as rationally and civilly resolvable through peacefully using cooperation, mediation, negotiation, and consensus building. Students were not required to be exposed to what Berlin termed agonizing choices throughout the first eight or nine years of their formal education. In high school, when students were to be introduced to issues for which there was no consensus of values or beliefs, the issues were largely theoretical and impersonal. Learning outcomes related to the conflicts focused on the development of rational problem-solving skills in relation

to these issues, not the value conflicts themselves. There were no specific learning outcomes within the Alberta program of studies that required students to understand the incommensurate and incompatible nature of many values and to consider how they would apply that understanding in terms of their own ethical development and future decisions.

In addition to this omission, the parental notification and opt-out policy potentially reduced students' exposure to the incommensurate and incompatible nature of some values regarding religion and sexuality. Thus, in circumstances where students may be exposed to values that conflict with their own or those of their parents in areas given elevated moral importance, Alberta's policy is one of avoidance. As such, it fails to uphold its own stated value of pluralism in the face of a potentially agonistic conflict.

As Alberta policies failed to address the issue of value incommensurability and incompatibility, this finding's convergence or divergence with the literature was impossible to determine. However, it is important to discuss the extant literature that relates to the implications of such an omission.

The incommensurate or incompatible nature of some values is accepted by many as a factual condition of human existence (Berlin, 1958/2008; Galston, 2009; Gray, 2013; Inazu, 2014; Williams, 1981). As discussed in chapter 2, Berlin (2007) advocated a pluralism that requires toleration and compromises. Inazu (2014) argued that a confident pluralism resting on toleration, humility and patience is needed to allow us to

live with these deep differences. . . A confident pluralism is rooted in the conviction that protecting the integrity of one's own beliefs and normative commitments does not depend on coercively silencing opposing views. A confident pluralism seeks to maximize the spaces where dialogue and persuasion



can coexist alongside deep and intractable differences about beliefs, commitments, and ways of life. (pp. 591-592)

The failure of Alberta's policies in accounting for the incommensurability of human values means that educational efforts are not explicitly directed towards supporting a society that has to deal with the resulting value conflicts. While attempting to develop educational policies, including curriculum, to do so would be rife with challenges of the very nature that they would be intended to address, the absence of any explicit attempt to do so is potentially concerning. It appears to lack an understanding of the importance that Berlin, Bejan, and Inazu place on the roles of toleration and civility in negotiating value conflicts within a pluralist society.

***Insight Three: Moral Education in Alberta Contained Potentially Incommensurable and Incompatible Value Conflicts in its Articulation of the Good***

The third insight was related to the second in that it related to a failure of Alberta moral education policies to address potential value conflicts, but in this case the conflicts omitted from discussion were contained within its own conception of the good. Two specific instances of such conflicts were identified. Within the first theme, an individual's self-interest and the well-being of others were both identified as subthemes related to an individual's moral agency. However, it is quite likely that, at least in some instances, the interests of the self and the well-being of the other will be mutually exclusive. This conflict is similar to the critical tension between the rights of the individual and the interests of the community identified by Morris and Cogan (2001).

Another conflict existed in the Alberta moral education policy theme relating to the nature of the good society. Two of the component subthemes were the embracing of

diversity and a desire for social cohesion. These two competing goods comprised a second of Morris and Cogan's (2001) critical tensions. Although the existence of these conflicts is not surprising given the pluralist nature of values, the omission of any mention of them in Alberta policies was another illustration of its avoidance of addressing agonizing conflicts.

### ***Implications of Alberta's Moral Education Framework***

This study identified three primary themes that shape moral education policy in Alberta: the individual as a moral agent, the nature of the good society, and the school as a nexus for common and uncommon values. These themes collectively form the foundation of Alberta's moral education agenda. In this section, I will discuss the potential implications of the theme's and their interconnectedness and how they might shape moral education.

The concept of the individual as a moral agent is central to Alberta's educational philosophy. Policies reflected a strong emphasis on the primacy of the individual as someone who must navigate moral decisions autonomously. This implied that the school system should aim to cultivate ethical decision-making where students are not merely passive recipients of societal norms, but are encouraged to critically engage with the values they encounter. The emphasis on success-orientation and other-orientation as virtues indicates that students are expected to strive for personal success while maintaining responsibility for the well-being of others.

This theme has significant implications. On one hand, it places a high value on personal autonomy and success, aligning with a liberal individualistic tradition that prizes critical thinking and entrepreneurial spirit. However, this individualism can potentially

overshadow the development of social and civic responsibilities. If not carefully balanced, the focus on personal success may lead to an education system that fosters competitiveness over cooperation.

The second theme defined the good society as envisioned by Alberta's moral education policies, highlighting the importance of democracy, pluralism, social cohesion, and civility. The nature of the good society, as articulated in these policies, emphasizes that students are being prepared to become citizens in a democratic, pluralistic society. Pluralism and diversity are seen as positive values that must be embraced, suggesting a commitment to preparing students to engage with a variety of perspectives and cultures.

The focus on civility and shared values pointed to an education system that aims to promote social cohesion, even within a diverse society. By emphasizing civility, the policies attempted to ensure that students learn to engage with others respectfully, particularly when disagreements arise. The democratic nature of the good society implies that students are expected to contribute to the collective decision-making processes, which reinforces the idea that education is not just about individual success but about the cultivation of responsible, ethical citizens.

The third theme viewed the school as a mediator between common and uncommon values. Schools were seen not just as places where students learn academic content but also as sites where societal values are negotiated and contested. The school's role as a nexus is reflected in policies that both support common values and address uncommon values. This theme implied that schools must find ways to integrate diverse values within the broader framework of Alberta's education system.

The significance of this theme lies in the school's role in maintaining social harmony while respecting diversity. Schools are tasked with teaching students to navigate conflicting values, whether these stem from cultural, religious, or individual differences. This responsibility can be challenging, especially when these values are deeply incommensurable. The focus on addressing uncommon values suggests that Alberta's moral education policies acknowledge the potential for value conflicts and aim to equip students with the tools to manage these tensions constructively.

The themes identified in the study are not discreet but rather are interconnected. The individual as a moral agent is not developed in isolation but within the context of the good society and the school's role as a mediator of values. These interconnections shape the broader agenda of Alberta's moral education system. For example, the theme of the individual as a moral agent overlaps with the good society in the expectation that individuals will contribute to social cohesion while pursuing personal success. The emphasis on pluralism and civility in the good society is linked to the need for individuals to make ethical decisions that respect diversity. At the same time, the school as a nexus for common and uncommon values reinforces the idea that individual ethical decision-making cannot be divorced from the social context in which it occurs.

Moreover, the interconnectivity of these themes suggests that moral education in Alberta must balance multiple, sometimes conflicting, priorities. On one hand, it must foster autonomy and personal success; on the other hand, it must ensure that students are prepared to live in a pluralistic society where civic responsibilities and respect for diverse values are paramount. The school's role as a mediator becomes crucial in balancing these

competing demands, highlighting the importance of creating an education system that is both individually empowering and socially cohesive.

***Implications of Inconsistency and Conflict Avoidance in Alberta policies***

The concept of pluralism in Alberta's policies appeared to be framed solely as something to appreciate or embrace rather than also being viewed as a challenge to be negotiated. As described earlier, the policies largely avoided addressing the agonistic nature of value conflicts that may arise within or between individuals. While some policies acknowledged the existence of value conflicts, they often implied that these conflicts could be resolved through negotiation or compromise.

Pluralism, in its essence, encourages exposure to diverse viewpoints and the negotiation of conflicting values. However, in instances where Alberta's policies recognized value conflicts, they leaned toward a resolution through avoidance rather than engagement. One of the most striking inconsistencies within Alberta's policies is the opt-out policy that allows parents to shield their children from encountering conflicting values around what are perceived to be particularly sensitive topics; in this case religion and sexuality. This selective approach reveals a significant incoherence in how pluralism is operationalized, as it suggests that exposure to some forms of diversity, such as race and culture, is essential, while other forms, notably sexuality and religion, are deemed negotiable.

The potential implications of this are twofold. First, it creates a scenario where pluralism is not genuinely practiced, as students are not exposed to the full range of values present in society, particularly those that may conflict with their family's beliefs. Second, it models a process of avoidance as a preferred method of dealing with the

existence of plural and conflicting values. The region and sexuality education opt-out policy essentially undermines the core values of pluralism, which most, if not all, other Alberta policies supported or actively endorsed.

Berlin's (2007) value pluralism allows for moral and cultural systems to be understood and objectively judged in terms of the existence of some universal values and common human intuitions by those external to those systems. Alberta policies did identify justice, fairness, and equity as shared values, but no connection was made between them and the values and beliefs of the diverse groups and individuals in society. This was not surprising. Without giving consideration to value conflicts, there existed no reason to make such a connection, as any adjudication of values was not deemed necessary.

Another significant incoherence lies in Alberta's simultaneous promotion of a pluralist society while embedding both monist and relativist elements within its policies. The policies were silent on the deeper, agonistic value conflicts that Berlinian pluralism highlights. Instead, they project an idealized vision of pluralism that avoids the reality of value incommensurability. This utopian view of pluralism assumes that all values can coexist harmoniously without grappling with the real conflicts that arise from their incompatibility.

Throughout Alberta policies, especially within the goals of education and curricula, pluralism was described as something to be appreciated or embraced. Nowhere in Alberta's policies was its pluralist nature described as presenting challenges or being in any way detrimental. The diversity of identities and multiple perspectives that flowed from them were viewed as non-problematic goods. With the exception of the

controversial issues in senior high school social studies, any conflicts that arose were seen as resolvable, and multiple perspectives were generally viewed as assets that integrated into a pluralist ideal. This monistic vision of a pluralist ideal differs from the constrained pluralism advocated by Berlin (2007) that requires toleration and compromise.

Ironically, the somewhat utopic view of pluralism, as presented in Alberta policies, was also related to the existence of potential relativism in the same policies. As was the case with monism, the relativism in Alberta's moral education policies was not explicit or comprehensive but quite limited and conditional. The largely unconstrained acceptance of all diverse perspectives that were described in Alberta policies provided no means by which those perspectives could be judged. In fact, only the high school social studies curriculum twice addressed the possibility of doing so when it identified student learning outcomes for "evaluating various perspectives of future visions of Canada" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 24) and "examining multiple perspectives regarding the principles of classical and modern liberalism" (Alberta Education, 2007, p. 37). In contrast, it included ten instances in which the outcomes indicated students were to "appreciate various perspectives" on a particular issue. True relativism would dictate that evaluations of values and beliefs across cultures cannot be made. Alberta policies did not go so far as to prohibit such evaluation, but in having repeated outcomes describing that diverse views were only to be recognized and appreciated, Alberta policies certainly contained elements of relativism.

The inconsistencies and incoherencies within Alberta's policies have significant implications for the province's moral education agenda. The inconsistent or selective

application of pluralism undermines the development of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to negotiate pluralism, including tolerance. By failing to engage students with, or actively shielding students from, certain value conflicts, the policies deprive them of the opportunity to engage with and understand diverse perspectives, which is an essential component of moral education in a pluralistic society.

### **Key Features for Robust Pluralist Moral Education**

Having discussed some of the implications and limitations of Alberta's current approach to moral education, the question arises as to what an approach to a robust pluralist moral education could look like. Building on the conceptual framework for this study, I offer a proposed set of criteria for such an approach.

#### ***Pluralism as a Core Principle***

The proposed framework positions pluralism as a fundamental aspect of the moral world, rejecting both moral monism and relativism. Instead of advocating for a singular moral truth, this approach acknowledges the existence of multiple, sometimes incommensurable values. These values can and do conflict, both within and between different individuals and groups in society. Recognizing the agonistic nature of these conflicts, the framework encourages students to grapple with these tensions in constructive ways.

#### ***Toleration as an Educational Aim***

One of the key elements in the conceptual framework is the role of toleration. Rather than fostering mere acceptance of all viewpoints, the framework promotes an active toleration that requires students to respect differing values while engaging in critical reflection and dialogue. Toleration, in this sense, is not passive but involves a



commitment to understanding and negotiating conflicting perspectives without defaulting to relativism.

### ***Engaging with Agonistic Conflicts***

A robust moral education must prepare students to navigate conflicts that arise between incommensurable values. The conceptual framework integrates Berlin's idea of agonistic conflicts between values that cannot be fully reconciled but must be managed in a pluralist society. This approach contrasts with contemporary models that seek to eliminate or ignore moral conflict. Instead, the framework teaches students how to negotiate these conflicts by balancing, or choosing not to balance, the tension between universal and particular values.

### ***Fostering Moral Independence***

The conceptual framework emphasizes the importance of fostering moral independence in students, allowing them to critically reflect on their own values and the values of others. This contrasts with approaches that focus on conformity to universal values. By promoting moral independence, the framework encourages students to develop the skills necessary to engage in self-directed moral reasoning and decision-making in a pluralistic society.

### ***Critical Dialogue and Negotiation***

A strong pluralist moral education should go beyond simply presenting multiple perspectives and instead foster critical dialogue and negotiation between them. Students are taught not only to recognize the existence of different values but also to engage with them in meaningful ways, understanding the implications of those values in real-world

contexts. This approach prepares students for active participation in a democratic society, where negotiation and compromise are often necessary.

### ***Striving for Negative Liberty and Universal Values***

Finally, an approach to robust pluralist moral education should incorporate Berlin's idea of negative liberty - the freedom from interference - as a key element. It should stress the importance of ensuring a minimum threshold of negative liberty to allow individuals to pursue their values. However, it must balance this with the need to teach universal values, such as justice, freedom, and love, that are essential for human experience and societal coexistence. This approach must appreciate the challenge of teaching students how to navigate conflicts between personal and universal values while maintaining a commitment to negative liberty.

### **Summary**

This chapter discussed how Alberta's moral education policies address the pluralistic nature of society by analyzing key themes through the lens of Berlin's value pluralism. The chapter highlighted the acknowledgment of pluralism in Alberta's policies but discussed how it remained underdeveloped as the policies tended to present pluralism superficially, often focussing on group identity rather than addressing the deeper conflicts of incompatible and incommensurable values. The key findings were identified, and the results were then discussed in terms of their implications. Lastly, a proposed criteria for the elements of an approach to robust pluralist moral education was proposed.

## **Chapter 6 – Recommendations and Conclusion**

In this section, I provide recommendations for professional praxis and further research flowing from the analyses and findings, as well as concluding thoughts on the study and the challenge of providing pluralist moral education.

### **Praxis Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study, I offer the following recommendations to those involved with educational policymaking and potentially to those engaged in the provision of moral education in Alberta.

#### ***Praxis Recommendation One***

Policymakers ought to craft an explicit moral education policy. Ideally, the development of an explicit moral education policy would occur at the provincial level, as that is where the statutory responsibility for education and the current locus of curriculum development resides. However, in the absence of a provincial policy, boards or schools should consider developing their own moral education policies insofar as is permissible given their obligation to align with provincial directives.

Recommendations two through five provide further suggestions on what ought to be considered in such a policy or, in the absence of a formal policy, considered by moral education practitioners. In making these recommendations, it is prudent to reconnect with the inherently moral nature of teaching (McLaughlin, 2000) as discussed in chapter 1, which to some extent means all teachers are essentially moral education practitioners.

#### ***Praxis Recommendation Two***

Policymakers and practitioners should clearly define key concepts as they are applied in policy or practice. Although all policy implementation necessitates

interpretation, clearly defining the key policy terms increases the likelihood of various stakeholders developing a common understanding of the key concepts. Some examples arising in this study that may be valuable starting points were various pluralisms, including, but not limited to, cultural, religious, ethnic, identity, and value pluralism. Value labels such as justice, fairness, and equity also require clarity. Clarity of learning outcome qualifiers, such as appreciation, is also important. An understanding of how appreciation differs from awareness, understanding, acceptance, or agreement would have been valuable in aiding the interpretation of policies in this study.

### ***Praxis Recommendation Three***

Moral education should expose students to both the conceptual idea of value incommensurability and incompatibility, as well as actual agonizing conflicts and perspectives that may exist within their own personal values and between their values and others. I would also encourage exposing students to ethical models that strongly acknowledge the pluralist nature of society's conflicting values as a potential means of developing student understanding and appreciation of value pluralism. Two examples of such models are Schwartz's Basic Human Values Theory (Schwartz, 2012) or Moral Foundations Theory (Graham et al, 2013). Schwartz's (2012) Basic Human Values Theory emphasizes the pluralistic nature of values by identifying ten universal values that guide human behavior. It organizes these values within a circular structure based on their compatibility or conflict with each other. These values include Power, Achievement, Hedonism, Stimulation, Self-Direction, Universalism, Benevolence, Tradition, Conformity, and Security. The model highlights how adjacent values, such as

Achievement and Power, are compatible, while opposing values, like Self-Direction and Conformity, create tension and conflict.

Haidt's (2013) Moral Foundations Theory emphasizes the pluralistic nature of values by identifying six core moral foundations that guide human behaviour across cultures. These moral foundations include: Care/Harm, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation, and Liberty/Oppression. These foundations highlight the moral pluralism inherent in human societies, as different cultures or political ideologies emphasize some foundations over others. For example, liberal ideologies often stress Care and Fairness, while conservative ideologies give more weight to Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity. Schwartz's and Haidt's models are not provided as the authoritative frameworks for exposure to pluralistic thinking for students. That is beyond the scope of this study. They are provided as concrete examples of models that could be used to clearly highlight value pluralism across cultures. In developing an understanding of the pluralist nature of values and experiencing them in personal, yet developmentally appropriate ways, students may be better prepared to fully and ethically engage in their world.

#### ***Praxis Recommendation Four***

Policymakers and practitioners ought to consider emphasizing toleration and civility as critical virtues in a pluralist society. Given the reality of value pluralism and the fact that one person's moral judgments may conflict with another's, developing the capacities for Inazu's (2014, 2015) confident pluralism as previously discussed and what Bejan (2013) refers to as mere civility may help students address conflicting values. Mere civility refers to the minimum degree of courtesy, respectful behavior, and decorum

expected of all members of a tolerant society in social situations (Bejan, 2013). Both confident pluralism and mere civility place significant importance on the role of toleration. Although less cohesive than acceptance or agreement, tolerance has been identified as a critical value in a pluralist society (Bejan, 2013; Inazu, 2014).

#### ***Praxis Recommendation Five***

Policymakers ought to reconsider policies that have the potential to restrict students' exposure to values different from their own (or their parents). Exposure to conflicting values is a fact of living in a pluralist society, and exposure to these experiences in school provides preparation for life outside school. Removing the parental opt-out policy relating to sexuality or religious topics would potentially provide students with such experiences. Although this issue does involve potential conflict with parental rights, legal precedent supports the province's right to teach ethics in schools notwithstanding the religious objections of some parents (*S.L. v. Commission scolaire des Chênes*, 2012).

#### **Research Recommendations**

In this study, I provided an interpretation of the official policy documentation and debates involving moral education. This study illuminated a number of related areas that, if addressed, could improve the state of research and policy in moral education. These recommendations relate to the development of a clearer theoretical understanding of moral development and the practical implementation of moral education efforts.

#### ***Research Recommendation One***

My first recommendation for further research is to expand the examination beyond the current context and scope to include exploring how moral education policy is

developed, interpreted, and implemented at the board, school, and classroom levels. This would help provide a more comprehensive understanding of moral education in Alberta.

### ***Research Recommendation Two***

A second recommendation for further research is to investigate the impact of different curricula and pedagogical methods on developing students understanding of, and ability to navigate, a world with incommensurate conceptions of the good. This may include the development and testing of approaches to teaching confident pluralism, mere civility, and toleration, as well as an examination of their impact on social cohesion. Research on these impacts should focus on the results within the school environment, but should also extend outside the school to examine how impacts observed in the school transfer into other environments.

### ***Research Recommendation Three***

A final recommendation for research is to examine how school system structures support or inhibit pluralism. One specific focus worth exploring within this area is the impact of Alberta's robust range of schooling options. For example, Alberta currently has tax-supported public boards, separate (Catholic) boards, charter schools, private schools, and homeschooling. Some of these schools have distinct religious foci, which may reflect society's moral diversity among them but may also impact the level or range of exposure to plural values within them. It would be helpful to understand the impact this may have on a pluralist society.

### **Conclusion**

Over two millennia ago, Aristotle articulated a fundamental problem of humanity when he posed "What is the good for man? ...there is very general agreement; for both

the general run of men and people of superior refinement say that it is happiness and identify living well and doing well with being happy; but with regard to what happiness is they differ.” (Aristotle, ca. 350 B.C.E./1980, p. 155). 2,300 years later, Isaiah Berlin brought specificity to this problem by identifying value pluralism and emphasizing the incommensurability of values themselves as an underlying challenge faced by communities or societies (Berlin, 1958/2008). Assuming that we concur with Dewey (1909) that the school is “fundamentally an institution erected by society to exercise a certain function in maintaining the life and advancing the welfare of society” (p. 7), the challenge of pluralism faced by communities is therefore a challenge for schools educating students within those communities and societies. In this study, I sought to determine how Alberta approaches that challenge.

This study investigated moral education policies in Alberta for the period 2013-2024. The purpose of this study was twofold: to derive an understanding of what comprises moral education in Alberta through the identification of implicit moral elements contained within current policies, and using a Berlinian perspective, to examine how moral education is reflective of, or responsive to, the pluralistic nature of Alberta society. Through a qualitative content analysis of policy documents, curriculum guides, and government statutes, this research illuminated both the strengths and shortcomings of Alberta's current approach to moral education for a pluralist society.

One of the most significant findings of this study was the identification of moral education as an implicit but central element within Alberta's K-12 curriculum. The analysis revealed that Alberta's policies, while not explicitly dedicated to moral education, nonetheless place substantial emphasis on the development of ethical citizens.



Moral education is embedded in broader educational goals, particularly in fostering students' individual success and well-being, alongside cultivating a commitment to others and to society at large. This was reflected in the three primary themes that emerged from the data analysis: The individual as moral agent identified how Alberta policies reflected the nature of an ethical individual in relation to themselves, others, and society. The nature of a good society included characteristics of society identified as desirable in Alberta policies. The school as a nexus of common and uncommon values described how Alberta policies defined systems, processes, and structures to respond to the convergence of common and uncommon values present in society. Thus, although no explicit moral education policy existed in Alberta, moral elements contained within Alberta's education policies described an education agenda focused on developing students as individual moral agents who would contribute to a cohesive, civil, and pluralist democracy.

The resultant themes provided an explicit interpretation of the nature and scope of Alberta's moral education agenda implicit within its policies. However, a key limitation identified in Alberta's approach was its failure to adequately account for the inherent incommensurability and incompatibility of human values, a central tenet of Berlin's value pluralism. While the policies promote tolerance and diversity, they often sidestep the difficult, agonizing moral conflicts that arise when competing values cannot be harmonized. This omission risks creating a superficial form of moral education that acknowledges diversity in principle but avoids engaging with the deeper ethical dilemmas that emerge in pluralist societies. These dilemmas, as Berlin emphasized, are not easily resolvable, and moral education should prepare students to navigate them.

Consistent with their omission of value incommensurability and incompatibility, Alberta's policies also tended to promote a form of moral monism rather than pluralism. The policies often framed values as universally compatible and neglected the potential for conflict between equally legitimate but irreconcilable values. For example, the curriculum encourages students to respect diversity and practice inclusion, yet it does not address the tension between individual and communal values. As a result, moral education in Alberta remains underdeveloped in its capacity to foster true pluralism.

If moral education is truly going to reflect the inherently pluralist nature of society and fully prepare students to constructively engage with that society, an approach for robust pluralist education may be helpful. Such an approach should include: pluralism as a core principle; toleration as an educational aim; engagement with agonistic conflicts; fostering of moral independence; critical dialogue and negotiation; and a focus on striving for a minimal threshold of negative liberty to enable the pursuit of universal values essential for human experience. This approach may better equip students with the tools needed to navigate the complexities of pluralism and conflicting values in a meaningful way, thus preparing them for active participation in a democratic society.

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